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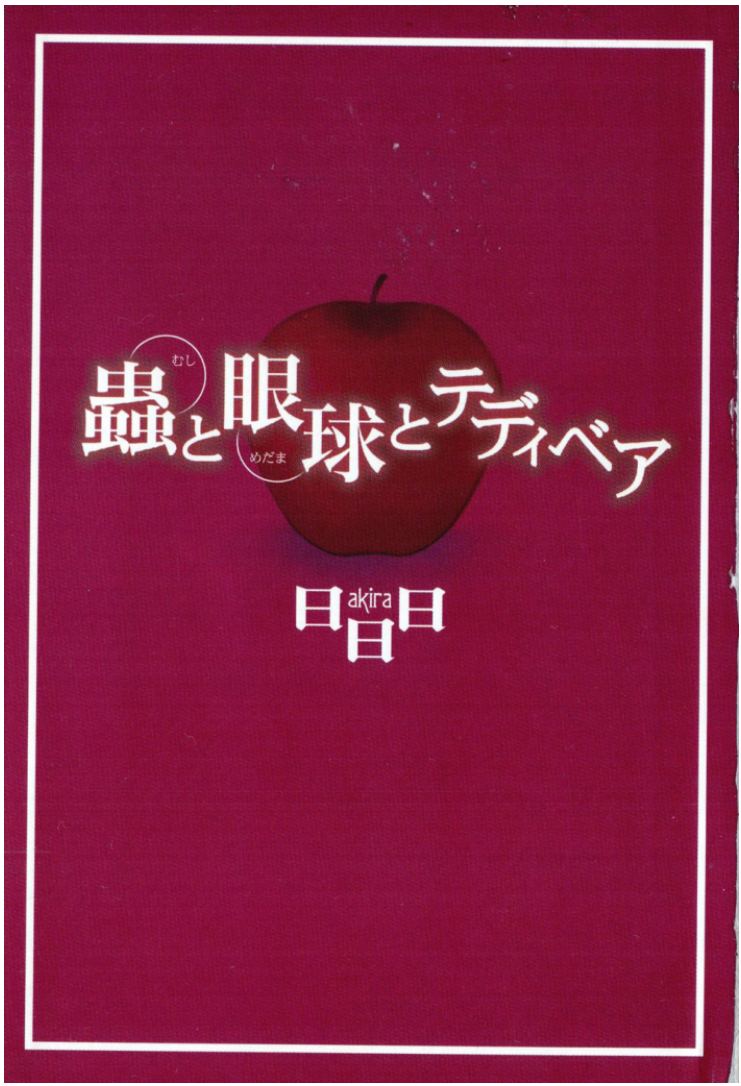
Mushi, Eyeball and a Teddy Bear

Color Illustrations



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Night 1: Usarin-kakka's Daily Edict

From ★ Usarin
To ★ Sensei
Subject ★ Edict
Body ★ Hello. It's Usarin. I know you would be the busiest after school finished, but since you said I could text
you whenever I want to, that’s what I’m doing now! If I’ve done anything wrong, just tell me off, okay? I’m home right now. Are
you still at school? If you think I'm too much of a hassle, you could just ignore this message. But if you are free, then do reply! I’ll
be waiting!

From ★ Sensei
To ★ Milady Usarin
Subject ★ In the middle of a teachers' conference
Body ★ I’m bored. I have no idea why the job of a teacher is so long-winded. I’m so bored that I’m drinking cup after cup of
coffee… But that's not good for my stomach. Why did you text me, anyway? Is something up? Because if there is anything, then I, Sakaki Guryū,
will hightail out of here right away. It’s not like I’ll miss much from this kind of meetings, anyway. Don’t worry.

From ★ Usarin
To ★ Sensei
Subject ★ Edict 2
Body ★ Ehh~ You’re in a meeting, Sensei? I’m sorry. I must have distracted you. I’ll get straight to the point, then: After your
meeting adjourns, please come over to my house, Sensei. Do you remember what day it is? It's November 11th… It’s your birthday!
It’s impossible to hold anything grand at my house, so I’ve only prepared a cake for you. If you’re free – and I mean really free –
then please come over to my place. Happy birthday, Sensei! I’ll be waiting!

If one were to describe Sakaki Guryū, a teacher at Kannonsakazaki Private High School, they would probably use words such as 'talented', 'elegant', 'genius', or 'stunning' – you could probably list every single positive adjective you knew and apply them to Sakaki, and none of them would seem out of place. He was perhaps the most perfect human being in the world, a being bearing the closest resemblance to God. Terms like 'godlike', 'flawless', and 'one-of-a-kind' seemed to match him – Sakaki Guryū, the pinnacle of human evolution.

He obtained a doctorate at twelve, was skilled in all fields, was hailed as the reincarnation of Leonardo da Vinci – not only was he intellectually gifted, he was also physically talented. Aikido was

meant to be a hobby, but soon he found his way into the Olympics. His touch on the piano melted hearts. The dabbing of his brush shook the world. Title such as 'The Best', 'The Finest', and 'The Greatest' seemed to suit him perfectly. Backed by the extremely wealthy Sakaki Organization (the kingpin of the Japanese economy) to which he was the heir, it seemed that he had already succeeded in life. Failure was clearly not on the list.

However, Sakaki had a weakness - no, more of a problem. This 'problem' was the reason why, when he was nineteen, he went down to the countryside and started teaching at the private high school he used to attend. This was also why he no longer paid any attention to literature, art, or sports. It was a 'problem' the his family's organization was powerless to deal with.

Yes, it was a 'problem', and the cause was Usagawa Rinne.

She was a normal high school girl whom Sakaki loved. Was obsessed with, even. In fact, you could even say that Sakaki worshiped the very ground she walked on.

It was because of her that Sakaki Guryū strayed from the path of the elite.

Hoping to spend more time with her, Sakaki decided to become a teacher in her school. All other literary, artistic, and athletic pursuits, which were merely ways to pass the time in the first place, were put on indefinite hold. All of her living expenses, including her apartment's rent, her utility bills, tuition fees and pocket money, were fully sponsored out of Sakaki's pocket. In short, he was her 'Daddy-Long-Legs'.

Since there was nothing wrong with that nickname, Sakaki silently acknowledged it.

"What a waste of talent! What the hell are you doing?! Resign from being a teacher! Go do something proper instead!"

People who knew nothing of Sakaki's feelings kept saying those words to him, but those were just pointless words of advice. There was something more important for Sakaki than producing a thesis overturning the most fundamental laws of science, securing a gold medal by beating a world champion in the Olympics, or making a name for himself as one of the most prominent artists in history. That something special was spending days with Usagawa Rinne, doing ordinary stuff, living an ordinary life. That was true

happiness for him.

Priorities did, after all, differ from person to person.

And the same goes for happiness.

The Head Teacher stood up and began making a speech about teenage delinquency and the current state of social safety, about how they were a threat to society, and what a better world it would be if they were all rounded up and expelled. From anyone else's point of view, this would seem like anything but a peaceful discussion.

What was he angry about? Was his anger *genuinely* about the degeneration of society? That was highly unlikely – the Head Teacher was probably just pissed, that's all! Pissed at the fact that nobody wished him "Good morning" today, pissed at the students who secretly called him "ant-eater" behind his back! In order to vent his anger, he was directing his hatred towards all teenagers in general.

"Boring." Sakaki said softly.

It was indeed boring – everything was. Due to the low birth rate and a new policy prioritizing senior citizens, the school was becoming poorer by the day. Lights were not turned on for the sake of saving power, resulting in the meeting room being extremely dim. Married couples refused to have children as raising them requires too much money. Snobbish politicians prioritized elderly citizens, hoping for a higher voter turnout. Even if the school's fortunes were rapidly declining, there was still no reason to pin it on the students. Plus, there was nothing wrong with being poor, Sakaki reasoned.

Looking at Usagawa Rinne made him think that way.

Human beings, after all, were only able to gain happiness by fulfilling their own goals. Even if someone owned a lot of property, they would still be unhappy if they feel that they hadn't achieved their own goals! Similarly, even if someone was poor, as long as they felt they were happy, then they would of course be happy! The former example, in this case, referred to Sakaki before he met Usagawa Rinne. The latter example referred to Rinne.

Rinne was extremely poor. Her only hobby was cooking, and even though she had to work hard to make ends meet, she still bravely

lived on. She must be happy, and the one who got to meet her – Sakaki - must also be equally happy.

Sakaki, listening to the meeting in a corner, shifted his attention towards his cell phone upon receiving Rinne's message.

The Head Teacher was still going on loudly about something. *It must be hard on him. Screaming out loud like that in the winter will definitely give him a sore throat,* Sakaki thought as he withdrew the vibrating cell phone from his pocket, preparing to read his new message. Even though the Head Teacher visibly frowned at this, Sakaki pretended not to notice as he indifferently began to reply to the message openly the meeting table.

The Head Teacher immediately reprimanded him.

“Sakaki-Sensei, please refrain from using your cell phone in a meeting...”

“I'm sorry.”

Sakaki said softly, while still maintaining a conceited attitude.

“I previously evaluated which was more important, listening to you ranting or reading my message. I acted according to the order of importance. If I offended you, I hereby apologize.”

Sakaki haughtily – or should we say arrogantly - silenced the Head Teacher. The Head Teacher coughed, as if wanting to display an air of strictness and continued talking.

Sakaki’s phone made a “Rat-Tat-Tat” sound not too long after as it vibrated on the table. It seemed as though he received a new message. Sakaki naturally reached for his phone.

The Head Teacher, who was in the middle of another meaningless rant, warned, with spit flying everywhere. “Sakaki-sensei..."

“...I’m sorry, I suddenly have urgent matters to attend to, and need to get going. Oh yeah, Head Teacher, make sure to send me the minutes by tonight. Only list the important bits. There shouldn’t be much anyway seeing how things are going.”

“What -!”

Seeing the Head Teacher’s face darken, Sakaki immediately retorted. “No buts! I have urgent business to settle now. Don’t forget, this school is under the jurisdiction of the Sakaki Organization, and the teacher’s union is also funded by it. Therefore, I think those who sit down and quietly listen are the bright ones.”

Sakaki stood up afterwards. Full of rage at being humiliated, the Head Teacher’s face was red as a tomato. Sakaki ignored him and continued to avoid his gaze. Nodding at the other teachers, who were rendered speechless, Sakaki turned and left the meeting room. *Usagawa Rinne is calling me. Why should I waste my time in such a pointless meeting? She should be my main priority.* Sakaki reasoned as his long strides echoed in the empty hallways.

Sakaki's elegant gait would often make people stop in their tracks. Some girls would even point at him, as if trying to say "unbelievable!".

Males and females both would be robbed of the ability to think for a few seconds when they see his elegant demeanor, stopping in their tracks to marvel at him. Of course, "him" in this context refers to Sakaki Guryū, who was making his way to Usagawa Rinne's apartment. Like a wave rippling outwards, Sakaki ignored the stares of the crowd and walked ahead.

His blonde hair, inherited from his American mother, shimmered transparently under the sunlight. This was in addition to a series of proper facial features and a perfectly proportioned body. Disliking outlandish outfits, Sakaki frequently wore a suit, save for occasions where he went to Rinne's place. Every time he tried to wear something fancy, he would be mistaken as a celebrity, sometimes accompanied by fans screaming "Give me an autograph! Give me an autograph!!" while dashing towards him. Sakaki often wondered what would be the point in getting a high school teacher's signature. Even though he had a celebrity-like name (and signature), it didn't mean he was an actual celebrity!

Since this was a countryside town, the crowds began to thin as soon as Sakaki left the main street. He began jogging on the long, dark, uneven path, as he made his way to Rinne's apartment. He could have reached her place faster with a bike or car, but since Sakaki wanted to avoid getting his perfect hair (which took him great effort to dry and comb every day) getting messed up by the wind, he opted to go on foot. Besides, Rinne's apartment wasn't that far. Looking at his new, handpicked clothes, Sakaki wondered if these clothes suit him. Although he never really felt comfortable wearing clothes marketed to youngsters, Sakaki felt that wearing a suit to a party was simply too ridiculous, and ended up putting up with it. Plus, wearing a suit often gave him a "teacher-like" aura. Whenever he was alone with Rinne, Sakaki hoped to shed his teacher "shell", and be himself with her.

It was quite a distance from the nearest station before there were any houses. Large fields were left abandoned without apparent

reason, some with wooden houses erected on them. These wooden houses, some even with tiled roofs, gave one a sense of antiquity, as if time had suddenly stopped.

Just as Sakaki was making a couple of pointless observations...

“Hey there, young sir...”

A voice drifted out from somewhere, ambiguous in the extreme in its timbre - he couldn't even tell if was it the falsetto of a man or the contralto of a woman.

Sakaki turned towards the source of the voice and saw a small, odd-looking stall in the middle of the field.

But could that even pass as a stall? A purple mat was placed on the ground, hammered into the soil with nails, while a robed figure sat silently on top of it. The figure’s face was hidden by a long hood, making it impossible to tell if the wearer was a man or a woman. There was also a large, crystal ball on the mat, which the person was gently polishing. There was also a small sign placed on the mat, which simply read “Fortune telling. 100 yen”.

“Fortune telling...?”

Why would a fortune teller be in such a place? Shouldn't they be in a shopping center or something – no, wait, what was a fortune teller doing in the countryside anyway? And could one really make a living with charging a measly 100 yen per transaction? Many questions surfaced in Sakaki's mind. This was a suspicious trader indeed.

The mysterious trader lifted both hands. Maybe it was due to the long sleeves on the robe, but this made the trader seem positively inhuman. The trader then said to Sakaki. "Yes, young sir. Would you like to give fortune telling a go? I'm very accurate, you know. Your fortune in wealth, love, or life in general... Or perhaps you would like to hit it big? Win a big prize? Look for something long

lost? Get rid of something bothering you? I can tell all sorts of fortunes!”

“Sorry, but I’m not interested.”

Sakaki replied curtly, as he quickly turned his back to the fortune teller.

“Wait, wait!!” The fortune teller said and hastily got up. The fortune teller then proceeded to say something that made Sakaki freeze in his steps.

“You won’t lose anything by just getting a reading, young sir! I sense a malicious aura around you, and if you don’t get rid of it soon, it is certain to bring you misfortune! You seem to be a powerful person who doesn’t really care about what happens to himself. However, this malicious aura may cause misfortune to fall upon those around you! I know you don’t want that to happen, do you? Sakaki Guryū...”

“Huh...?”

Sakaki turned his head furiously. There was a crystal ball in the fortune teller’s outstretched hands as the fortune teller mystically continued. “...The person you like. Ah, Usagawa Rinne, isn't it? She will be the first victim and die a very horrible death. You wouldn't wish for such fate to befall your lover, do you, young sir? A corpse, with a gouged out eyeball...”

“You...!”

Sakaki roared as he charged into the empty field towards the stall. This shady character not only knew his name, but Rinne’s as well! He forcefully grabbed the fortune teller by the collar.

“Ouch! Don’t do that! It hurts!” The fortune teller yelled, somewhat unemotionally. Sakaki ripped open the fortune teller’s hood, revealing the face of a surprisingly young man. His expressionless face, however, gave Sakaki the chills. It was like a bug's, totally void of expression.

The young man’s hair was messy, and his eyes shimmered in a frightening crimson.

Sakaki hollered in a loud voice. “Who the hell are you? How do you know mine and Rinne’s names? And what’s this about a corpse? Are

you saying Rinne is going to die? What on earth do you mean? Answer me, brat!"

"That's why..."

The fortune teller wasn't the least bit shaken. He was also not the slightest bit attracted towards Sakaki, as he looked at the older man without blinking, his eyes looking rather like accessories on his face.

"...I told you to come for a fortune reading, didn't I? That's what I could tell anyway. I'm a fortune teller, after all. You will encounter a series of misfortunes after this, misfortunes which will destroy your normal days, shatter your everyday life, and bring forth pain and suffering! And the overture to this catastrophe, the first victim, will be the person you adore, the girl named Usagawa Rinne..."

The fortune teller said all this in one breath. Not pausing to draw a breath, he continued. "...She will be killed by a devil, in a brutal, inhuman way – her eye sockets will be pierced by a spoon, and her eyeballs will be gouged out! She will slowly die, with pain being the last thing registered in her brain! Because it's such a painful way to die, I bet she'll even hate you! Compared to being murdered like this, I bet she would wish to have died back then, in that big, blue sea. *Ah, it would have been so much easier if I had died in the sea back then~ Why did you have to save me, Sensei? I hate you, I'm going to curse you for all eternity...*"

Sakaki slammed his fist into the fortune teller's face, as if trying to stop that prediction from coming true.

Even after being walloped in the face, the fortune teller's expression did not change. As he was being grabbed by the collar, he did not fall as he said, in that feminine-yet-masculine tone: "That's what's going to happen in the future. Punching me isn't going to change it."

"What the... You son of a...!"

Sakaki yelled, clearly shocked by the fortune teller's inhuman response. "Who the hell are you? What is your motive? What are you planning to achieve? Why are you saying such things? You're saying misfortune is about to befall me? What misfortune? Why must Rinne die?"

Sakaki had no doubt that this fortune teller was a real one now,

most likely due to his inhuman reaction and aura. Also, Sakaki was clearly disturbed by the other's shimmering red eyes. Normal human eyes don't glitter. This guy was clearly not human.

"We are called 'Mushi'."

The shady fortune teller said in the same tone.

"W - We?"

"... Yes we. We do not have form. We do not have sentience. We only obey the orders given by our superiors. We are a collection of individuals who have forsaken individuality. We are known as the 'Mushi'.

The 'Mushi' said, with ironically bug-like eyes.

The purple mat Sakaki was standing on seemed to shimmer as if it lacked substance. As if it were ethereal. *What's going on here? Is this really true?* Thoughts raced through Sakaki's head.

"As a 'Mushi', my orders are to pass you these warnings from the future. You are to ponder upon my words, to think of an appropriate strategy and to try to delay the inevitable. Who knows? You might be able to avoid the worst case scenario."

"Worse case scenario?"

"The coming of the devil."

The 'Mushi' spelled out.

"It could happen anytime – today, tomorrow, ten years later, maybe even teb seconds later. However, in the end, that day will still come. The devil will appear before you, murder Usagawa Rinne and cause the worst case scenario."

"Worst case scenario?"

"I can't tell you."

The 'Mushi' answered, rejecting Sakaki's second question just like a faulty calculator failing at the last moment. Did he mean to say that the scenario was not part of his fate?

"Even though I can't tell you, what I can say is that it would be the worst case scenario."

“Then to me, the worst case scenario would be Rinne dying. Even if you were to weigh the Earth exploding or the universe imploding on one side of the scale and Rinne dying on the other, the scale would still clearly tip towards her favor.”

“That might be it, I guess!”

People, after all, had different priorities. The Mushi ambiguously replied, before saying: “In a situation like this, it doesn’t matter what you hold as the worst case scenario. After all, if Usagawa Rinne isn’t murdered by the devil, then the worst case scenario will never occur. So try to keep it that way.”

The Mushi brushed Sakaki’s hand away as he rummaged through a small cardboard box on the mat. A while later, he produced a giant egg and cupped it in both hands.

What kind of egg was that? It was slightly smaller than the human skull – around the size of an ostrich’s egg. It had a white base and, as if wanting to look less dull, had red and green patterns on it. However, these patterns seemed genuine, and it certainly didn’t look like something someone had painted on it.

Of course, this was no egg a bird, reptile, amphibian or insect could ever lay.

What was this egg? And why was the fortune teller holding it?

The 'Mushi' carefully raised the egg and handed it to Sakaki.

“This is the egg of a Dream World Beast. It’s not a creature of this world, so don’t bother searching any encyclopedias for it. Don’t forget to hand it to Usagawa Rinne. You don’t have to keep it warm. It will hatch after some time. If you’re lucky, it’ll hatch into a Dream World Beast before the devil arrives. Dream World Beasts are primitive beings. Just like animals, they experience filial imprints, and will recognize the first thing they see as their mother. So it should theoretically recognize Usagawa Rinne as its mother, even though they are physically different. Since Dream World Beasts are very powerful, they should most likely be able to ward off the devil.”

“Because of its parents?”

“Because its parents are in danger. Dream World Beasts value family ties, and they are the best counter to the devil. Hmm...

Before the Dream World Beast hatches, though, you should carry firearms on you in order to protect Usagawa Rinne, even though guns are forbidden by law."

The Mush' gently prodded Sakaki's chest, and true enough, a handgun was concealed beneath his cloth. How could he possibly tell? Sakaki was shocked. He felt as if he was breathing another planet's air, and it was composed of different components, causing him to feel strange and dizzy. It was as if the world had suddenly gone mad.

"Who... What on Earth are you?"

Sakaki yelled, having asked this question for the third time.

For the first time throughout their encounter, the Mushi smiled.

"I wonder, what should I answer for you to believe me?"

For some reason, the old apartment Usagawa Rinne stayed in looked even more run-down today than the tile-roofed houses. It was a three story building with a total of six rooms, three of which were vacant. The second floor was where the office was situated, and room 1A, on the first floor, belonged to Rinne. Room 1B, which happened to be situated opposite Rinne's, was occupied by a self-claimed musician. According to Rinne, that woman was either bad at socializing or she just plain hated humans, since she rarely mixed with anyone at all.

There was also the question as to why an apartment was even built in a place like this. Despite being an apartment, the rooms were uncomfortably small and narrow, which in turn caused the rent to be very cheap – so cheap, in fact, that even Rinne could afford it with the money she earned from her part-time job. Also, despite Sakaki's frequent urging about *Don't worry about the money, just go get a better house!*, Rinne stubbornly refused to listen, replying with a simple "As long as the room is long enough for me to sleep in, its all the same to me!". Not only did Rinne turn down Sakaki's offer, she was also very against receiving any form of cash from him, insisting that she could take care of herself just fine.

Of course, Sakaki had given Rinne all forms of help behind her back. These include threatening her boss with the prospect of not being able to establish himself in society should he ever fire Rinne, or installing a water purifier in her apartment's main water supply in fear of her getting sick after drinking contaminated water.

Let's get back to the present. By the time Sakaki reached Rinne's apartment, it was already six o'clock in the afternoon. Treading on the old cement floor, he made his way to apartment 1A and stopped. He took a deep breath. Appearances were indeed deceiving. Sakaki was, in fact, quite vulnerable to girls, especially when the girl in question was Rinne. He tended to get nervous quite easily, so stopping by the door and taking a deep breath every time he visited this apartment was already a routine of his.

Again, for some unknown reason, this run-down apartment had an intercom. Sakaki pressed the door bell, and waited.

Rinne's clear, chime-like voice quickly came out from the intercom.

"Who is it?"

"Milady Usarin, it's me."

"Yes～～"

Even though he never said who he was, Rinne already knew who it was on the other side of the door. The only person who would address Rinne as "Milady" would be Sakaki. Rinne immediately let out a squeal, and cut her reply short.

Since the room was small, Rinne literally reached the door in less than two seconds.

Appearing behind the open door was the silhouette of a cute, little girl. Because her clothes were quite dated, she looked somewhat old-fashioned, but ignoring this fact, she was indeed really cute. Clean and straight hair, snow white skin, a gentle smile on her face; those alone were enough to make her very attractive, but what attracted Sakaki the most was her clear, chime-like voice.

Rinne, who was up to Sakaki's chest in height, looked up to him and smiled, like a blossoming flower.

"Sensei, you really came!" Rinne said in a transparent, bell-like chime. "I'm so glad you did! Come in, it's freezing outside!"

Rinne pulled Sakaki's arm and dragged him into her room. There was only enough space for one to take off their shoes (and also store them at the same spot – there wasn't room for a shoe rack). Sakaki took off his shoes, and let her drag him into her room.

Rinne's apartment was about 4 tatamis wide, and consisted of her room, a toilet and the kitchen, so the four-and-a-half tatami standard measurement for rooms (including a toilet) actually took up the entirety of Rinne's apartment unit. There was no bath in her unit, so Rinne had to use the bath located outside everyday.

Sakaki took off his coat and placed it in a corner, along with the egg.

There was a strong aroma in the room that wouldn't disperse, most likely due to Rinne's cooking. There was a small window in the room that was tightly shut because of the cold outside. Even if she turned on the kitchen fan, it wouldn't have helped much. After telling Rinne about his empty stomach, Sakaki snuggled both his legs into the futon beneath the table.

Rinne opened the fridge and withdrew a box and some malt tea. She poured the tea into a cup she withdrew from a sink, and placed it onto a saucer. She then took the box, along with the tea, and went to Sakaki's side.

"It's done!"

"Thanks a lot... But why are you sitting next to me? Isn't it squishy? The table is square anyhow, you don't have to squeeze beside me, right?"

"You don't understand?"

Rinne smiled as she leaned on Sakaki.

“It’s because I want to be by your side! Even if its one centimeter closer, I still want to be closer to you.”

“Happy birthday, Sensei...” Rinne concluded as she looked up at Sakaki.

Sakaki looked as if he was trying very hard to withhold something.

“... Milady Usarin, if you utter such cute words, I’m afraid I won’t be able to hold myself back. Please don’t be that way. I’ve already promised you that I won’t hold your hand or do anything before you graduate. So please, don’t make me break that promise.”

“I won’t mind if you break them those kind of promises. You shouldn’t have to restrain yourself in the first place.”

Rinne said matter-of-factly as she continued to lean into Sakaki.

This is bad, Sakaki thought. Rinne was too cute, to the point that Sakaki wanted to hug her on the spot. But he couldn’t. If a teacher did that to a student, it was considered an offense.

Sakaki resisted the notion with an iron will, and steered the topic to a safe direction.

“Speaking of which, Milady Usarin, it seems that the stuff in your room have increased yet again?”

“They have?”

“Yeah, like that television for example. I didn’t notice it the last I was here? Did you buy it recently?”

“I wouldn’t be able to afford such a thing! It’s too expensive! You know how the shopping district has these lucky draws once in a while? Like on their 10-year-anniversary or grand sales and such? This was the prize for the runner-up!”

“So you drew the second place?”

“Nope, its just that nobody did, and the television became an extra. The middle-aged man who was in charge of the lucky draw said ‘It’s no use keeping it. I guess we’ll just give it to Rinne!’, so that’s how I got it～”

“He’s abusing his authority that way. It’s fairly easy to see what he was after.”

“Yeah! But since he said he would give it to me, there wasn’t any reason for me to refuse him, was there? Actually, I kinda wanted a television myself too. That’s why I accepted it. Oh, and I also took lots of instant noodles back with me.”

In a corner of the room, there was indeed a cardboard box labeled “Kannonsakazaki Shopping District”. If it was filled with instant noodles, then it would certainly have been a lot of instant noodles. Sakaki warned Rinne. “Don’t make it a habit to accept things from strangers. There have been lots of reports from school about students accepting such offers and then being charged with high-

interest loans."

"Okay…"

Rinne smiled bitterly, as she opened the box on the table. There were two slices of cake inside. She was too poor to purchase an entire cake.

Rinne placed the cakes on the saucers, then said, "I don't have any forks!" She then stood up, hesitated a while, and stood rooted to the spot as if thinking of something. After a while, she went to another corner of the room and took a paper bag.

Her face was flushing red. It was as if she was embarrassed and frustrated at the same time.

"Erm…"

Sakaki more or less guessed what the paper bag meant and why she was hesitating.

The bag must have contained Sakaki's birthday present, and Rinne was obviously hesitating whether or not to give it to him. She was probably thinking of something along the lines of "Would this be appropriate? Would Sensei like it? And what if he rejected it?", and thus was hesitant to present Sakaki his present.

Sakaki understood. He said to Rinne with a benevolent expression never seen by anyone else. "Don't worry! As long as its something from Milady Usarin, then I'll definitely treasure it, no matter what!"

"R-Really? But Sensei, you're so rich. I bet your previous birthdays were much grander, and the presents must have been extraordinary, right? I'm sorry, or maybe I'm ashamed of myself."

"That's not true."

Sakaki answered truthfully: "A present's value is not measured by how much it cost. A birthday's worth is not based on how big the celebration was. To me, Milady Usarin, being able to spend the day like today sitting by a warm table and enjoying cake, toasting with malt tea, this is more enjoyable than anything I've experienced thus far. This is definitely my best birthday by far, so please, don't put on such a face."

"B-b-but…"

“Stop saying 'but'. I’ve sworn to you that I’m with you not because I pity you, but because I really love you from the depths of my heart. Trust me, you aren’t worthless. I’m not a superior being. Milady Usarin, you are more than a match for me. Please believe me when I say that you are a special girl to me. I’ve given you my word, didn't I?”

“Yeah...”

I’ve given you my word.

Usagawa Rinne shouldn’t have been ashamed in the first place. Who cares if she was poor? As long as she was herself for Sakaki, she would be the one he loved the most. Sakaki had told her this before when the two of them had first met. Back then, Rinne hadn’t been able to smile naturally, and wasn’t too capable of having long conversations. Compared to then, she had become so cheerful.

“T-then, at least for today...”

Rinne said as she lowered her head. “Don’t call me ‘Milady Usarin’.”

She said in a voice that sounded as if she was pouting, yet teasing him at the same time.

This was Rinne’s true desire, expressed half-jokingly.

Sakaki obliged and said, “Usagawa.”

“Call me by my given name.”

“Rinne.”

“Yeah...”

Most likely satisfied, Rinne nodded, as she withdrew his present from the bag.

It was a woolen scarf. Rinne’s handiwork was good, and the weaving was absolutely fantastic.

“I was going to give you this for Christmas, but since I managed to finish it early, I’m going to give it to you now. I’ll prepare something else for Christmas.”

“Thanks. Wow, this really is some handiwork. Did you learn it from anyone?”

“I learned it from one of my friends. I stayed at her place for about three nights, and begged her to teach me her secrets. All I needed to do was master the basics, and it was continuous repetition from then on, which is why it was surprisingly easy once I got the hang of it! Although the wool is of cheap material, its 100% hand-sewn with lots of love!”

“I see, it’s very warm!”

Sakaki smiled in joy. Love – it definitely provided the most warmth!

Rinne held the scarf with both hands, and sat down facing Sakaki.

“I’m going to help you wear it. Lower your head a bit.”

“Okay.”

Sakaki obliged and lowered his head. The scarf gently went around his neck.

It was then that Rinne kissed Sakaki.

Time seemed to freeze at that moment, as Sakaki’s face was plastered with shock. Rinne put her hands by his ears, and gently kissed his lips. The scarf, which was gently wrapped around his neck, softly fell to the ground. This sudden act caused Sakaki to blank out, as he felt the warmth emanating from Rinne’s hands, lips and heart.

“Umm…”

Suddenly, her lips parted.

Rinne slowly furrowed her eyebrows, and mumbled, “…I’m sorry Sensei. I broke our promise.”

“Ah…”

Sakaki was at a loss of words. Rinne looked down, and her thick fringe hid her expression from Sakaki.

“But I’m constantly in pain, wondering what I am to Sensei. I like

Sensei. I like Guryū-san. But since we're in a teacher-student relationship, and Sensei refuses to hold hands or call me by my name and all. Sometimes I feel really scared…"

Rinne said as she shook her head.

"…I'm very stubborn, aren't I? Sensei treats me so well, yet here I am, asking for more. I wonder, what am I to Sensei? Does Sensei really like me? I believe you when you say you do, but even then… I'm scared, really scared. That's why I wanted some affirmation…"

Rinne sounded like she was on the verge of tears. She wasn't crying. Even though her voice was trembling, she wasn't crying. Sakaki understood – it was because these were her true feelings. That was why she wasn't crying. He understood that these weren't just words uttered at the spur of the moment. These were matters that were troubling her deep in her heart.

Sakaki suddenly felt the urge to curse himself. Rinne mentioned that she was in pain, and she was scared. Scared of being hated, being dumped by Sakaki. She loved him that much!

And like how Usagawa Rinne loved him, Sakaki Guryū loved her just as much.

Because the two of them treated each other as important, they were afraid of losing that significance, of losing each other. Just like the two sides of a coin – even though they were totally different, both of them were just as real. Even though both of them were technically unrelated, they were just as tightly bound.

Sakaki caressed Rinne's silky hair before bending down and kissing her lightly. Rinne gently trembled as she closed her eyes and cried, this time with tears flowing down her cheeks.

We humans sometimes seek affirmation because we are a fragile species.

Affirmation of love, feelings, and a few other emotions.

That was definitely not something bad.

So Rinne, you can stop crying now.

Sakaki Guryū's 20th birthday ended with fond memories etched deep in his mind. By 10 o'clock, he decided to go back home. Even though he wanted to be with Rinne, it was, after all, already ten. Who knows what might happen if he stayed even later! It was best to retreat for now.

Rinne was so cute that Sakaki found it almost impossible to reject her. He was a healthy 20-year-old man after all. It was dangerous to continue staying by her side - dangerous in "that" sense, of course. No matter what, Sakaki wanted to avoid crossing the last line of defense, the point of no return.

Sakaki bode farewell to Rinne with the scarf he received as a present around his neck and a slice of cake in his hands. In the end, he failed to think of a way to pass the Mushi's strange egg to Rinne, because the atmosphere certainly didn't permit it. Plus, upon further thought, the Mushi fellow did seem a bit too suspicious.

It was impossible, after all, for a human to predict the future. And it would be possible for people to know Sakaki and Rinne's names if he really investigated. And the glow in his eyes was most likely a cheap trick. All that nonsense about Rinne being killed and a worst case scenario... what rubbish! Sakaki had actually taken the Mushi's premonition seriously for a while when he entered Rinne's room! After seeing Rinne's cheerfulness, however, he dismissed the thought entirely. To think that Rinne would be killed... what a joke! Even if one went to hell and back, one wouldn't be able to find a reason for Usagawa Rinne to be killed. What a load of bull!

But then...

For some reason, Sakaki still felt a tingle of anxiety. Was everything that young man - that Mushi - said just a big lie? If so, why did he have to weave such a lie? And if it wasn't, how in the world did he know in the first place?

Even as Sakaki stopped to think about this using his genius intellect, the conclusion seemed to steer towards an unpleasant direction that caused Sakaki to dismiss the thoughts straight away. These anxious thoughts, however, seemed to pile up in his brain, casually sinking in as if they are lodging themselves in mud.

Sakaki stood under a lamp post in the middle of a pitch black street.

He was on the uneven, country-side path. He would reach the shopping district in a few minutes. He could see the faint neon lights in the distance. The skies were a cloudy gray – there were no stars tonight and the moon was nowhere to be seen. Sakaki stood still, clutching the odd egg in his hand.

Was what the Mushi said really a lie?

What if it wasn't? What if he had committed an irreversible mistake? That was a scary thought indeed. It terrified Sakaki tremendously.

Sakaki decided he should go back. Even though there was a chance he was lied to, and maybe even laughed at, he would at least deliver the egg to Rinne and notify his security guards to secretly protect her. Or maybe he could bring her to his residence before the egg hatched. That would put her far away from harm's reach.

I'll protect Rinne.

That was what Sakaki thought.

Putting the matter of whether or not she would be killed aside, if there was any threat of impeding danger, it had to be neutralized no matter how subtle the threat may be. Even if it might be no more than a lie. Or a cruel prank. Or something of the sort.

Just as Sakaki made up his mind and turned around...

A girl, holding a spoon in her right hand, passed by his side.

At the same time...

"Ah!!"

Sakaki yelped in surprise, his heart throbbing furiously.

He looked at the silhouette of the young girl, whose footsteps seemed to be dancing in the shadow. The girl was dressed in old, tattered clothes, like a vagrant. She didn't have any pants on, and was barefooted. She had long, untamed hair, like a wolf. Her hair was in a mess; perhaps she didn't condition it. The spoon in her right hand, however, appeared unusually shiny.

...A spoon.

The Mushi's words once again flashed through his mind.

She will be killed by a devil, in a brutal, inhuman way – her eye sockets will be pierced by a spoon, and her eyeballs will be gouged out! She will slowly die, with pain being the last thing registered in her brain...

That wasn't a good sign! It wasn't a good sign at all!!

A strange, young girl appearing in a place like this, at a time like this, with a spoon that was rendered unusually shiny by reflecting the light from the lamp post above – this all coincided with the mysterious fortune teller's prophecy. The person whom Sakaki treasured the most would have her eyes dug out with a spoon, and subsequently killed. This was all Sakaki needed to act.

"Hey you, wait!"

Sakaki hollered as he ran towards the girl, intending to stop her.

He stretched out his hand to block her path.

"Do you intend to get in my way?"

With a pure, monotonous voice that seemed to carry none of the noise we know as 'emotion', this voice came from behind Sakaki's stiff back. There was... no body in front of Sakaki.

Sakaki immediately turned around.

"I'll dig out the eyes of anyone who wishes to stop me. Are you a Mushi? Even though your eyes don't glow red, are you a Mushi? Or are you some unrelated person?"

The girl rasped. Judging from her appearance, she was no more than a high school student. Her voice sounded normal – if it wasn't for the strange sense of defiance it contained. It was as if even the sun would freeze after hearing it.

The girl had thick, dark shadows underneath her eyes, which seemed like black holes sucking in all the spiraling darkness around them. She had a childish face and slender appendages – yet there was this strange, sinister air about her. She stared at Sakaki with deep, dark eyes. Sakaki felt as if he was peering into a gun barrel, cold and emotionless, while reeking of death.

He had no idea when she had sneaked behind him, but Sakaki was ready to put up a fight.

The girl's face contorted.

"If you're not a Mushi, why do you seek to stop me? Or do you not have any intentions of getting in my way after all? If you have nothing to say, then get out of my way!"

"Why you...!"

"Gankyū Eguriko."

Gankyū Eguriko… Eyeball Gouger?

It was as if she dug people's eyeballs out!

"I don't care what you're called. What do you plan on doing?"

Sakaki had already noticed that this girl wasn't human. A normal girl wouldn't be able to move with speed exceeding his jurisdiction.

And... She knew about Mushi.

That means...

"If you're not going to do anything, then buzz off."

"What do you plan on doing? I don't think I should let you pass."

Sakaki calmly said as he glared at the girl.

"Then so be it."

Sakaki felt that the girl made no sense.

"If you don't move..."

The voice came once again from Sakaki's back...

“Then I’ll make you move.”

Sakaki felt a heavy blow at his neck. His mind wasn’t even aware of what was happening, let alone his body reacting. However, his sharp reflexes allowed him to steady his footing. She would need something more than that to topple Sakaki Guryū.

From his rapidly distorting vision, Sakaki caught sight of the girl as she mumbled, “What a stubborn fellow. But you won’t be able to stop me for long.”

Sakaki felt a strong blow being delivered to his stomach. This merciless attacker didn’t give any chance for Sakaki to counter-

attack, as she slammed her open palm against Sakaki's lower jaw.

Sakaki fell down, unable to do anything else.

And the huge egg, which was previously resting in his hands, fell to the ground.

Rinne, Usagawa Rinne – the name echoed continuously within Sakaki's mind. He was struggling, trying hard to not be swept away by the torrent of thoughts concerning Usagawa Rinne. After being mercilessly beaten back by the waves of thoughts about her, Sakaki finally came to his senses as he furiously opened his eyes. He was still lying under the lamp post on the uneven path. And the first thing he saw, from the corner of his eye, was a young man cradling a crystal ball.

"Oh, you've finally woken up!"

"Ugh..."

The Mushi, whom Sakaki had thought to be a part of his dream, appeared right beside him. Sakaki climbed to his feet, ignoring the ache of his body, and grabbed the Mushi by the front of his robes

"Where's Rinne?"

"Calm down. Shouting isn't going to do your lower jaw any good, especially since it's just been punched, literally."

"I don't care what happens to me. Where's Rinne? And that brat..."

Seeing Sakaki's anxious face, the Mushi couldn't help but let out a smile. "Who knows? I just happened to be passing by and met you here by chance. That's all!"

"How would some random passerby know I was punched? You were hiding somewhere nearright from the start, weren't you?!"

The Mushi opened his eyes in awe.

"What great deduction! I'm sorry. It's just that back then I didn't think I would be of much help. That's why I didn't step out to save

you! Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"I just said that I don't care what happens to me! Where's Rinne? And that brat?"

"And I just said I didn't know, didn't I? Instead of asking me, why don't you just go affirm for yourself where the devil is headed – go to Usagawa Rinne's residence."

"You said, Rinne's... residence."

Seeing Sakaki's face grow paler, the Mushi said coldly, "What did you expect? Hmm… If you hurry over now, you might be able to stop her! Instead of wasting time talking to me here, why don't you hurry over there instead?"

"Uh..."

Sakaki immediately pushed the Mushi aside and sprinted towards Rinne's house.

"Oh, and don't forget this."

The Mushi said indifferently as he placed the egg back in Sakaki's hands. Sakaki accepted it without much thought.

Sakaki's involuntary feet carried him forward over the uneven gravel ground as the Mushi's figure slowly melted into the background, like a shadow disappearing behind his back.

Sakaki ignored him and continued running. *Run. Keep running.* That was what his brain was commanding his feet. *Run like the wind!* He ran along this long, empty road, reminiscent of hell. Sakaki tried to suppress the urge to puke as he continued clinging on the tiny, almost non-existent sliver of hope, and dashed ahead.

Usagawa Rinne, Usagawa Rinne, Usagawa Rinne.

Her name swirled through his mind, sealing his other thought processes.

What's happening now? Is this some form of punishment? Since when did the world go wrong? Since when did it go crazy? It was too strange, too bizarre. Sakaki felt like crying – this was totally illogical.

But then – this was reality.

He initially wanted to wait till Rinne had graduated before they get married. Since he was a teacher and Rinne was a student, he had continuously told himself to just cross his fingers and wait. It was only three years – such a short amount of time. It would go by in the blink of an eye. He had firmly believed that his future lay three years ahead of him, even though God was most likely blind in one eye, even though fate was unnecessarily cruel.

“Rinne!!”

He was at the old apartment. Sakaki hammered the ancient wooden door, as if trying to break it down by force. He was yelling her name at the top of his voice all the while.

Rinne! Rinne! Rinne!!

There was no reply, no reply at all. That was strange. Did she go out for a bath perhaps? But how was that possible? He was just being overtly hopeful.

“Bang!”

Sakaki withdrew his handgun from his coat and shot the doorknob without a second thought. He then kicked the door open, as if he didn’t care if he broke it in the first place. True, someone might have heard the gunshot, but Sakaki couldn’t be bothered any more. Shoot first, questions later. Even if this became a criminal case, Sakaki didn’t care.

Rinne was in danger. Usagawa Rinne was in danger,

That left him no choice.

“Ah…”

The door to Hell swung open before his eyes.

The worst case scenario unraveled before him.

A girl was covered in blood.

It was Rinne's corpse.

Sakaki's emotions exploded that instant.

"...So that's how it is. I know. You hate me don't you, God?!"

There was no need for explanation. Rinne had died in a locked room. A blood-stained girl was standing next to her. It didn't take a genius to guess that this person was the criminal, Rinne's murderer.

If that was the case – she should die too.

Go to hell!!

Sakaki relentlessly opened fire at her. The girl was taken by surprise, as she took a bullet to the chest, followed by one to the head, and to one of her legs - a total of three bullets. Fresh blood splattered everywhere in the dimly lit room with a sickening "swish" as the crimson red fluid trickled down from the walls. Before the girl had the chance to scream, her head was already against the wall. She was dead. He had killed her – killed a human.

No, she wasn't a human. That was Rinne's murderer – a devil.

That was why she deserved to die.

Sakaki mumbled something as he approached the poor, mutilated corpse of Rinne. She was sitting, with her back against the table, her feet facing outwards. He head lay slumped on the table, and she had an absolutely blank look on her face. One of her usually sparkling eyes was now replaced with a spoon, while the other was dully open. Usagawa Rinne had died – just like what the Mushi predicted.

Sakaki pointed the gun barrel at his own temple as he fell to his knees, tears pouring down his cheeks. Looking at Rinne's dead body, he had only one choice left – that of taking his own life. Sakaki didn't have the strength to keep living in a world without

Usagawa Rinne. There was no happiness in a world without her, just a boring, mundane life. That was why Sakaki decided to follow her by committing suicide. He cursed God and fate for being so cruel towards him as he edged towards Rinne and apologized.

“I’m sorry Rinne. It hurts doesn’t it? Compared to being murdered like this, wasn’t it better if you had perished in the vast sea then? I’m sorry, I’m really sorry...”

Sakaki mumbled, as his fingers reached for the trigger.

“I love you, Rinne!!”

That was when Usagawa Rinne sat up.

As if waking up from a dream, Rinne slowly stretched her body and observed her surroundings. Her sight finally fell on Sakaki. The spoon was still stuck in her right eye, and her tears were still flowing down her cheeks. Usagawa Rinne looked at Sakaki, and asked as if nothing was wrong, “Eh? What’s up, Sensei?”

There was an unfathomable expression on Rinne’s face.

“Ah, I can’t see from my right eye!”

That’s strange. Rinne thought as she rubbed her right eye. It was as if something was lodged in her eye. She stared at Sakaki as if questioning what it was. Grabbing the spoon, Rinne pulled it out of her eye socket as a thick, gooey liquid oozed out after it. Sakaki was speechless. What was this? This was absurd. Had the world gone crazy after all? Or was he dreaming? Was this a dream? He certainly hoped it was!

Right then, something strange happened again.

“Ugh...”

Rinne's expression suddenly contorted as she pressed her hands against her right eye, her face twisting in pain.

"It's hot! My eye, it feels so hot! It's burning!"

"R-Rinne..."

Sakaki was unable to move, even though his most treasured person was suffering right in front of him.

"Sensei, my eye feels so hot all of a sudden. What's happening? It's burning, it hurts. Sensei…"

She is calling for me. Usagawa Rinne is calling for me.

I should go and save her then.

Sakaki stood up and immediately rushed to Rinne's side. She was still pressing her hands against her eye.

Sakaki shook her shoulders and asked, "Rinne, are you alright? Rinne!"

"Sensei..."

Rinne mumbled in a soft tone as she removed her hand from her eye.

Sakaki stared at her face, and immediately sensed a shiver travel down his spine.

"It's too late!"

Usagawa Rinne's right eye had completely regenerated. It was previously pierced by a spoon, but now there wasn't a single scar visible. The only thing that remained was a trail of eye-fluid on her cheeks. But Sakaki was sure she had been hurt! He felt his mind go

numb – it was unable to catch up with this rapidly crumbling reality.

He placed an arm around Rinne's shoulders as his gaze traveled to a corner of the room.

"Even digging her eyeballs out failed to kill her. Its too late, so stop grieving…"

Even though her clothes were stained with blood, that other girl continued to look at him with her expressionless, gun-barrel like eyes. There was no trace of emotions on her face, but her voice was surprisingly pure.

This girl, who had previously tried to murder Rinne, was poking her finger into the gunshot wound on her head as she withdrew the bullet, in a manner so casual it that would certainly freak most people out. She then proceeded to do the same with the other bullets planted in her! Real bullets! Sakaki stared as three blood-stained bullets fell to the floor, as her wounds instantly regenerated just like Rinne's eye.

What in the world is going on?! I've had enough of this! I can't explain this in the least! Please stop, please give me back my normal life; my normal, ordinary life.

The girl ignored Sakaki and continued staring at Rinne. With a sad – no, more like a pitiful - expression, as if trying to say that they were in the same boat now, she explained to Rinne the situation she was currently in.

"You have obtained the Apple. It's now deeply rooted within your heart, so it's impossible to give up on it now. The Apple won't even let you die – it's in that deep..."

The girl said as she headed towards the door.

"You can never live as a normal human being again."

The girl suddenly turned back and said, "In order to not be consumed by the Mushi, you better do your best to protect that Apple."

The girl then walked over to the door and silently vanished beyond it. What was she planning to do? What in the world had just happened? In the midst of confusion, the girl had disappeared,

leaving behind two very confused individuals.

A blood-stained world. A messed up room. Mushi. An immortal girl.

Sakaki was totally lost here. He abruptly had this urge to grab on to something, so he chose the nearest target – Rinne. He tightly hugged Rinne, much to her surprise. But she merely closed her eyes and quietly embraced Sakaki.

Rinne felt at peace. The expression on her face suggested that even though she had no idea what was happening, as long as Sakaki was around, everything was fine. It was a face of pure bliss, as if she had entrusted everything to Sakaki.

Usagawa Rinne, my most important person.

“Sensei...”

“Yeah?”

Sakaki gently answered Rinne’s call.

“I suddenly recalled that long lost memory, my final memories before I almost died in the sea. That time, as death was fast approaching… I dreamed of an apple. The moment I ate the apple, I came back to life. I think it’s because I ate that apple that I was able to survive till today. I have this sort of feeling.”

Rinne pressed her palm against her right eye.

“That girl... she could have been here to take back the apple!”

Even if the world was thrust into frenzy, even if the basic laws of nature were broken, life still goes on. The end of today marked the arrival of tomorrow. The first thing that came the next day was the morning dawn. And the morning dawn was synonymous with homeroom. Being the homeroom teacher of Class 1-B, Sakaki Guryū was required to take attendance, as well as brief the students about their duties and responsibilities.

Yesterday, which was also the day Usagawa Rinne’s eyeball was gouged out by a spoon-wielding girl, Sakaki had brought her to a hospital just to be on the safe side. The doctors, however, were unable to find anything wrong with her. That’s why she attended school today, being her usual, cheerful self. As Sakaki Guryū went though the attendance list, though, he noticed, amongst a list of

over 40 students, a name which he had never seen before. It wasn't as though he had never heard the name before. In fact, he had heard it only just recently.

Gankyū Eguriko.

"...Eh???"

He had a bad feeling about this.

Sakaki chalked it up to an optical illusion as he took out a bottle of eye drops, applied it, and looked at the list again.

Gankyū Eguriko.

He would never mistake such a wild name. Seat number 11. That seat was still occupied by someone just yesterday! For some reason, however, the person in question was assigned to Seat 12. Sakaki had a very bad feeling about this.

What was happening? Just as he was wondering, the classroom door was suddenly open violently.

"Ah..."

The girl sported a unique, wolf-like haircut, a sailor uniform, white indoor shoes and the same, gun barrel-like eyes. She looked exactly the same as she had yesterday and, standing in the midst of normal high school students, she surprisingly didn't seem too out of place. She stepped in the classroom matter-of-factly, and proceeded towards the podium.

Sakaki Guryū stood stiffly at the podium.

The students shot curious glances at the girl.

"What's happening? Who is she?"

Sakaki thought of what to say to the girl, but his current state of mind was blank. Even as he was thinking of what to say to her, the girl had taken up a piece of chalk, and scribbled on the blackboard.

Transfer Student, Gankyū Eguriko.

It was the first time the students had heard of a transfer student transferring into their class. They started discussing among themselves, and Gankyū Eguriko didn't seem to mind.

With a sharp tone that clearly didn't sound like what a transfer student should have sounded like, she faced the students and said, "I'm a new transfer student, Gankyū Eguriko. You can call me Guriko if you want, but if you don't want to, then you might as well not approach me at all. As long as you mind your own business, I won't harm you, so try not to mind me too much, or even bother to talk to me. If you anger me, I'll dig your eyes out, no matter who you are. So if you treasure your own eyeballs, then don't provoke me. That goes for you busy-bodies, who can't seem to keep your mouths shut. I don't think anyone will miss you guys if you died anyway. That is all."

Guriko said all this in one breath as she lifted her head and looked at Sakaki, satisfied.

She requested to be called Guriko because her name was Eguriko? Her sense of naming was actually quite laughable!

Sakaki put up a straight face, and asked her, "What do you plan to do?"

Guriko said to Sakaki in a volume that only he could hear, "Don't worry, I won't kill her." Her voice was pure, void of any emotion, as usual. There wasn't a single smile on her face.

"Maybe I should say I can't kill her. The Apple had already rooted

within her. All physical attacks will be useless towards her. Since she has an infinite lifespan, I guess you could call her an immortal. And since she's immortal, I can't take away the Apple. And that basically means I have no reason to kill her whatsoever. However... +The Mushi... They have many reasons to kill her."

Gankyū Eguriko looked at the ceiling.

"I have a bad feeling about this, so I'm going to stay here for a while. Don't worry, I won't give you any trouble."

With that said, she moved to her empty seat, which was right next to Usagawa Rinne.

She had used some form of magic to create a space for herself within this school.

Ignoring Sakaki's furious stares, Guriko turned and glanced at Usagawa Rinne, who was right next to her. Rinne slightly flinched – it was natural. Sakaki told her she was previously murdered by this girl, having had her eyeballs gouged out with a spoon by Guriko. A most brutal method indeed.

Guriko said to Rinne, who was rendered speechless, in a pure, innocent voice, "I'm sorry."

"Eh?"

"Even though there was no other way, I did indeed try to kill you."

That was all she said, as Guriko suddenly slumped on the table and began sleeping. The whole class was shocked at the new transfer student's eccentric behavior – more like they were shocked by her bravery. She had put on an attitude that clearly stated she had no respect for the teacher whatsoever. The usually quiet classroom suddenly buzzed with activity.

It was, however, too early to get excited.

But of course, the students had no way of knowing that.

Night 2: The 15th November Incident

She didn't have anything that was important for her.

Maybe there had been, once upon a time. But that was in the past. She didn’t remember anything like that.

A millennium was far too long a time to live, yet too short a time to go insane. Happy memories - joy, hopes, dreams; all of these warm and gentle feelings had been gradually stolen by the passage of time till the only thing left was a cold and empty void. She was empty. All she could do was store the Apples of her friends in the void that was her flesh. There was no reason for her to go on. She didn't even know why she was still alive. She only lived for the sake of living, and she was beginning to lose her grasp on her humanity. Had she become a monster?

She couldn’t smile.

She couldn’t find a single happy or treasured memory.

She was something that did not smile and didn’t have anything important in her life – could she really be called a ‘human’?

“Who are you? What are you planning to do?”

- As usual, she choked on her own words whenever someone asked her that question.

Her shoelaces were messily bundled together. That was to be expected – after all, it had been a long time since she engaged in such a delicate activity. That was how she, Gankyū Eguriko, ended up sitting on the wooden floor in front of the dimly lit shoe closet at Kannonsakazaki Private High School, trying in vain to tie a butterfly knot. But after trying for a full ten minutes, she still couldn’t get it right. She could vaguely remember being good at it once, but that memory was long gone now.

The only memories she had of her past were those filled with terrible pain, and a feeling of helplessness so powerful it was crushing. That was the reason she never tried very hard to remember.

There was still quite some time before school began, and even the stairways were vacant. Guriko made it a point to get to school early

in order to practice tying her shoelaces. Despite that, she hadn't been able to produce anything better than a mess looking like a bunch of wet noodles, dragging her deeper into despair.

She didn't even realize that "he" was standing before her.

With her head bowed and focused on tying her shoelaces, it wasn't until she was engulfed by his shadow that she realized someone was standing in front of her, and so slowly raised her head.

It was a tall man with a handsome face. Guriko had never seen such a handsome human, though she felt nothing as he stared at her. Being an immortal, things like attraction and love meant nothing to her. Those feelings had withered away to the point of no return.

Despite that, she felt herself shiver involuntarily.

She had no idea why.

"...Are you waiting for me?" Guriko asked quietly.

It was such an un-cute reaction.

She had left all her cute, innocent, Usagawa Rinne-like reactions behind a long, long time ago.

"I never thought I'd see you here this early. Having trouble with your shoelaces?"

The man, Sakaki Guryū, shifted his gaze down to Guriko's messed up shoelaces. Approaching her nonchalantly, he knelt down and swiftly untangled the mess of strings, gracefully fashioning a perfect butterfly knot out of them.

With that, he looked up at Guriko, who was now sitting up straight, and bluntly said, "Don't you even know something as simple as that?"

"S-shut up! What are you doing here?"

Damm it!, Guriko thought. She never would have imagined this guy helping her out. There was even a tinge of happiness inside her from it. Still, she knew that being nice to him wouldn't do her any good.

She knew she couldn't be friends with him. That would be impossible.

Feelings like that just weren't going to exist, no matter how hard she wished for it.

That was something Guriko knew very well.

Guriko shifted her gaze from Sakaki's face, which was inches from her own, and bowed her head. Sakaki immediately stood up and took an arrogant pose. He glared down upon her from above.

"Like I said earlier, I want to know who you really are, your motives, and just what you are after here."

It was a calm, clear, and loud voice. It was a voice of authority.

Guriko didn't feel intimidated in the slightest, however.

"You don't need to know."

"That doesn't matter. Now talk. I don't want to use force, but I will if I have to."

"You think you stand a chance against me?"

Oh boy, what a bother.

Why did I say something like that?

In her sailor uniform, Guriko rose up slowly to her full height, looking up at the taller man. Sakaki returned her glare with an intense and fiery stare from his emerald eyes.

People with beautiful eyes would always be beautiful...

Guriko again averted her gaze and picked up her bag from the floor.

"...Why do you want to know? Are you curious? Or just intrigued?"

"Neither. I'm doing this out of love."

"...You're worried about Usagawa Rinne?"

"That's right."

"Hmm..."

What resolve! How could he answer without hesitation?

...Does he really love her that much?

Guriko gave him a small smile.

“...How admirable. Both you and Usagawa.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

With that, Guriko looked at him and said sincerely, “Instead of suspecting me, why don’t you look out for the Mushi instead? I didn’t manage to kill Usagawa, and won’t ever try it again. Those Mushi, on the other hand... they won’t give up on that Apple so easily.”

“Mushi...”

“Yes.”

Mushi – the name of the enemy.

Guriko put on a stern face and stared at Sakaki, as if trying to burn a hole through him with her gaze.

“Those guys were Mushi – And not only are they everywhere, they will stop at nothing to achieve their goal.”

Don’t let your guard down, she thought silently.

Out of all the teachers in Kannonsakazaki High School, the one in charge of Class 1-B, Sakaki Guryū, stood out above the others. His mannerisms were dignified and elegant, a total Prince Charming. To top it off, he was quite the unique teacher, maybe even the best in the world. However, there was something weird about his teaching. Despite technically being a History teacher, he actually covered all the subjects for his class.

Are we back in elementary school or something? Sakaki’s students didn't approve of this at all.

The answer to this riddle was Usagawa Rinne. Sakaki wanted to spend as much time as he possibly could with her. Thus, no matter if it was Biology, Gym, or Music, he indiscriminately taught

everything. Not only that, but he did so flawlessly. There were no imperfections in his teaching style. Class 1-B's steady rise in grades was easy to see. In addition to his handsome features and artistic talent (which were mostly wasted in his teaching profession), he had earned the students' approval as he was generally kind despite his somewhat cold personality. Therefore, he was truly unique. Gossiping co-workers called him Neptune King, lord of the perfect ones, out of jealousy. The students who grew up in a later generation usually had no idea what they were talking about.

Yet, this superhuman named Sakaki Guryū had a problem one wouldn't expect from someone like him. That problem was his 'religion' of 'worship-Usagawa-Rinne-above-all-else'. In other words, his obsession with 'Milady Usarin' and the notion that the world revolved around her. His love for the girl in Class 1-B was unrivaled and, in fact, was the very reason he had gotten a teaching license in the first place. His love was already common knowledge at Kannonsakazaki High School, and since he was the type to do whatever it takes to achieve his goals, he got his teacher's license through force, influence, and authority.

And naturally, he would appear in 1-B's classroom during lunch break because he wanted to eat lunch with Usagawa Rinne. Honestly, he was shameless. What was it about Usagawa Rinne that engrossed such a perfect man to this level of obsession? Does she have some sort of blood relation to Helen of Troy!? It was a common topic for gossip among the students.

Something unique happened during an ordinary lunchtime in this classroom —

- that it became known as "The November 15th Incident" from then on.

Hurry up.

What's taking Sensei so long? Usagawa Rinne thought to herself.

The date was Monday, November 15th. Luckily, the classroom was quite warm on that day. Rinne calmly smiled and put two lunchboxes on her desk as she waited for Sakaki Guryū.

Sakaki always ignored the normal school lunch and came to eat and chat with Rinne. She loved to cook, so it was never a problem for her to cook for two. Still, she couldn't help but feel a bit odd at times because of their rather unnatural relationship. Sakaki grew up sheltered in an incredibly wealthy household, and sometimes the resulting lack of common sense would cause clashes with others.

Secretly, though, she found this cute. It might not have been lady-like, but seeing that even the perfect Sakaki can sometimes act strange relieved her a bit. Sakaki Guryū was still human, just like her. Since that reassured her, she couldn't deny that she liked that part of him to a degree.

'Like' — Rinne liked Sakaki. Sakaki was a teacher, and she was his student. Despite this difference in status, this wall between them, the two loved each other. Such was their trust and their mutual understanding. They would be able to find happiness because of that.

Usagawa Rinne was happy.

Sure, she'd get worried from time to time.

But she was undoubtedly happy.

It was noisy. Even though Kannonsakazaki High School was prestigious enough to house only the most obedient of students, lunchtime was still rowdy. The school was old, so the floors and walls were worn and there were random scribbles here and there from past students. Although it probably bothered the neat freaks, Rinne actually liked it. She felt it paid homage to the history of the room, and gave some hints of those who occupied it before.

A cold breeze blew in, causing the curtains to flutter inward. Despite the lingering warmth, Rinne knew the transition to winter had already begun.

At this point, Sakaki Guryū finally arrived.

Sakaki's hair was a bit messy, probably since he'd rushed here.

As soon as he opened the door, Sakaki shouted, “Sorry I’m late...” even before walking into the room.

“It’s not a problem. I don’t mind.”

Rinne smiled as she gave her gentle response. Despite how much it actually had bothered her, she let none of it show. Still wearing that apologetic face, Sakaki passed through the students who had hushed at the appearance of their teacher and walked over to Rinne’s desk. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

“I’m truly sorry, Milady. Someone popped in at the worst time. It was some old man that looked like he could croak at any moment from the Education Committee or something. He kept going on and on without getting anywhere. I think the Director of Education probably dumped him on me.”

Sakaki thought nothing of saying the harsh words he used and sighed.

“Ugh! Why on Earth did they have to send him to me? And during my precious lunch break, too! The office is trying to punish me, I tell you.”

Rinne held back a laugh, and covered her mouth with her hands.

Sakaki’s confused expression was just too cute.

“Sensei, maybe it’s best if you don’t look at it as someone is wanting to punish you. That’ll make you paranoid to the point that just thinking about it will bother you!”

“That is true... What you say does make sense. Haha, I can’t tell who’s the teacher and who’s the student here, Milady Usarin.”

She honestly didn’t know why he insisted on calling her “Milady Usarin”. “Usarin” was an abbreviation of her name “Usagawa Rinne”, but why the Japanese people love to shorten all proper nouns was a mystery to her. Like pocket bells, personal computers, sexual harassment, or convenience stores. “Guriko” was another example of this.

Rinne thought of the mysterious transfer student called Guriko who had killed her, even though Rinne barely remembered what happened that night. She had been watching TV when her door was suddenly busted open. When she turned around, something pierced

her eye, and she passed out. When she woke up, Sakaki was by her side and her room was filled with blood. Beyond that, she remembered nothing.

What had she gotten herself into? Just who exactly was that Guriko girl? Rinne did not understand what had happened at all - not that she particularly wanted to delve deeper into the matter. She only got upset when something threatened her future with Sakaki. If Guriko had actually wanted to kill her, then that would really be scary. Rinne understood far too well the pain of death.

Yet, it would be silly to feel terrified just because of a possibility, and Guriko hadn't shown any signs of acting up again. Therefore, Rinne wasn't particularly on guard despite the fact that it had only been a few days since the girl transferred here.

Besides, no matter what happened, Sakaki would protect Rinne. That was the way it was.

With a cheerful expression, Rinne opened a lunchbox and idly chatted with Sakaki. She was poor, so her lunches weren't anything luxurious, but Sakaki still seemed satisfied. He looked like a young child with clasped hands when he exclaimed, "Itadakimasu!" Seeing that, she couldn't help but smile.

This calm scene was the way they passed their time.

While stuffing his face with green beans, Sakaki happily asked, "By the way, how's the wall that got blood splattered all over it? Did you find a way to get it cleaned up yet?"

Rinne poured some barley tea and downed it in one gulp. She then answered, "Well, there were bits of flesh in it too, so washing it with water only wouldn't work. Even scrubbing it with a rag probably wouldn't have worked, so I put new wallpaper over it."

"Wasn't that expensive?"

"Yup, I used up all my savings. Since the tatami was also soaked, I had to swap that out too. That was expensive too. For a poor student, that kind of spending is deadly."

"I'll never forgive that Guriko. But back to the main point. Why don't you get her to pay you back?"

In front of Sakaki, who seemed honestly angry, Rinne merely

shrugged.

“It was you who fired that gun! Besides — Guriko probably has it worse than me. I think she’s homeless, and besides, she told me that she can’t even afford stationery.”

“...Do you two talk often?”

“We sit next to each other. She doesn’t seem to have anything to do after class, so I talk to her.”

Rinne’s naivety nearly caused Sakaki to faint.

“Your lack of concern for your personal safety never ceases to baffle me, Milady! Didn’t I tell you not to talk to her? That talking to her will get your eyes gouged out?”

I’ll gouge your eyes out!

That was actually a death threat.

But still, Rinne was not afraid.

“Something like that is obviously a joke. I know for sure she’s just scared of being alone. She avoids other people since she doesn’t want to hurt them. I can see that since that’s how I used to be. I think Guriko actually wants to interact with people more.”

Rinne told Sakaki how she honestly felt, but he seemed less than impressed.

Sakaki sighed while looking up at the ceiling.

“Look... I know you’re naïve... But you should realize the reason why I don’t think she’s kidding is because she already gouged your eyes out once!”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Rinne, defeated, smiled and set her cup down with a “clank”. Sakaki seemed to have a grudge against Guriko, but Rinne didn’t think she was all that bad. She decided Guriko must have had a good reason for removing her eyes.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Milady? You’ve only been drinking tea so far.”

Sakaki was confused. Not only was Rinne's food untouched, her lunchbox was even open. His question was a valid one.

Rinne stayed silent for a while.

"... I-I don't know why, but I haven't felt hungry or thirsty ever since Guriko almost killed me. To be honest, I haven't eaten anything in about four days."

"What..?"

Sakaki felt his voice crack as he spoke.

"Even so, I'm still not hungry. Hmm... isn't that weird?"

As she looked to him, she saw his face had gone white as a sheet.

Sakaki had already told Rinne about her immediate resurrection after her eyes had been gouged out. But with this loss of appetite, this — wasn't this extraordinary!? It was proof she wasn't human anymore.

After noticing she no longer had a need to eat, she had constantly ran into the bathroom to look at herself. She had been making sure she hadn't turned into some sort of monster.

If that happened, she'd lose Sakaki, and that was a fate worse than death for her. So Rinne had kept her lack of appetite hidden until then.

"Sensei..."

Rinne looked at Sakaki, who had yet to respond.

Rinne understood that there were some things even Sakaki had trouble understanding, but even so, she longed for him to tell her "That's okay" or "Don't worry", or anything like that. If only she could get that reassurance, she could go on.

But —

The door slid open.

Guriko stood there. Her wolf-like hair looked like it had been styled by a typhoon. She had on a bored and impatient expression, but her eyes were the type that made you feel like you were staring down the barrel of a gun. This was the transfer student — Gankyū Eguriko.

Her gaze fell upon the couple that sat across from each other in the center of the classroom — Sakaki Guryū and Usagawa Rinne. Right then, her face turned to one of surprise. For Guriko, whose face usually revealed no expression whatsoever, showing a genuine emotion like shock was quite a rare occurrence.

Upon noticing the school's well known lovers, this transfer student who had recently dominated the school's discussions strode over and glared at Sakaki. She gave him a glare as if she were interrogating him and bluntly asked, "Have you eaten?"

"...Huh?"

"I asked you a question. Did you eat this food from the lunchbox?"

Guriko's expression was extremely focused. And thanks to her loud voice, the entire class had turned to look. All of them thought, "Ho boy, what's that transfer student doing now?". The classroom became silent very quickly. Despite how odd it was, Sakaki decided to indulge Guriko in her question.

"Yes, I ate it."

"Really?"

She muttered mostly to herself.

Guriko suddenly lowered her head and pressed her lips against those of Sakaki Guryū.

“Eh...” “Whoa...”

Sakaki’s eyes opened wide. Rinne was shocked. The class fell into uproar.

“Ugh...”

“Um... Ugh...”

Guriko held Sakaki’s head and locked lips with him. Put plainly, she kissed him forcefully. In the middle of lunch. In front of the entire

class. What the heck was she thinking?? This mysterious transfer known as Gankyū Eguriko had stolen a kiss from the teacher after just having been there for a few days. Not only that, she even did it in front of that teacher's lover. Her motives didn't matter. To the student body, this was clearly a declaration of war against Rinne. There was no other way for them to see it, but Guriko's next action provided only added fuel to the fire.

"Clang—"

Of all the things that could happen!

Guriko flipped the lunchbox Sakaki had been eating from and dumped out all the food that Rinne had lovingly prepared. Then, she took Rinne's lunchbox and dumped it out as well before driving her foot into the spilled food. After she had destroyed the lunches, she declared, "Don't eat this woman's food!"

And because of this —

What was there to be done? There was nothing that could explain this. Without another word, Guriko walked off with pride, leaving the stunned Sakaki and pale Rinne behind. Within moments, any student that had a cell phone began to text and call their friends. Messages like: "Usagawa Rinne's rival in love appears!" "On just her second day after transferring, Gankyū Eguriko kissed Sakaki Guryū, threw down the lunch Rinne made for him, and declared, 'Don't eat that woman's food!'" and "This will definitely be very interesting!" began to flood forth.

That was the "November 15th Incident." It has lived in infamy ever since.

For those living an ordinary high-school life, this had been quite the event.

“What splendid entertainment!”

The voice androgynous. It lacked distinction.

“What are you planning — Mushi?”

That pure and innocent voice seemed to cut through the previous one.

They were in front of classroom 1-B in Kannonsakazaki High School. Despite being outside the chaos of the classroom, there were always the echoing sounds of students in the hallway. The two of them faced off there, and despite them both having human appearances, neither of them were human at all. One was a Mushi taking on the form of a human, and the other had once been human, but had since become some creature that was only human-like — Gankyū Eguriko. The Mushi wore a sailor uniform, had short hair, and wore a friendly expression. She looked completely normal, save for her red eyes.

The Mushi, still emotionless, made an intriguing noise.

“This was just a confirmation! After all, there’s no way for ‘us’ to lose. We simply believed it important to check whether or not Usagawa Rinne’s Apple has taken root in her soul. You should already know there’s nothing we won’t do in order to achieve our objectives.”

“...After death, the soul separates itself from the physical body. Apples reside in the soul, so — death is the only requirement for taking the soul, correct? Unfortunately for you, Usagawa Rinne’s Apple has already taken root in her soul. I confirmed this myself.”

“But ‘we’ have not! We do not trust anyone besides ourselves, especially not you!”

The Mushi replied in a dull and terrible voice. They had no individuality, and thus did not have emotions.

They were an exterminating machine that moved in hordes — that was Mushi.

“Even if you’re willing to do anything, you should have some discretion — did you plan on killing Sakaki Guryū?”

“Since we did not know which lunchbox Usagawa Rinne would eat

from, we poisoned both of them. Mmm, that was a necessary sacrifice! We Mushi aren't hampered with your romantic ideals. As long as we obtain the Apple, it doesn't matter what happens to others."

Guriko grit her teeth and said, "That's why I despise you."

"That may be, but we don't particularly want you to hold feelings of affection toward us anyway."

The aura emitted between the two non-humans grew unbearably intense. Its strength caused the windows in the hallway to begin to rattle.

Guriko crossed her arms and glared at the Mushi.

"But you have already lost. Usagawa Rinne's appetite is already gone, so the poison wouldn't have worked on her anyway. Only Sakaki would have died. But I'm not going to let even that happen. You won't have your way if I have anything to say about it."

"Haha!" the Mushi laughed.

For the emotionless Mushi, laughter had only one purpose — to provoke.

"That was certainly an interesting way of removing the poison from that man's mouth. You seem to be turning into quite the rebel. Where did you learn something like that?"

"You talk too much! Because of you, I had to create a big disturbance in class. There was no choice... Why does my reputation always have to suffer?!"

"Because your attitude is normally terrible, anyway. Something like this just adds to it."

"It's probably - "

Guriko closed her eyes and then murmured as if in a trance, " - because God hates me."

She then pulled a spoon from her skirt pocket and threw it at the Mushi, too fast for the naked eye to detect. The spoon cleanly pierced the eye of the fake schoolgirl Mushi. However, that wasn't enough to stop its inertia. The spoon shot traveled through the eye

socket, through the brain, and out the back of the skull. Obviously, this wasn't something a human could pull off. The Mushi gave a small final smile before its ruined body collapsed. Right before it hit the floor, it broke down and disappeared.

The blood-stained spoon fell to the ground with a gentle metallic sound.

"It doesn't matter anyway. I'm used to being hated."

And so, Guriko skipped class and went up to the roof for an afternoon nap.

After school ended that day, Usagawa Rinne staggered home with an air of frustration and defeat. Her thoughts were plagued with what had happened at lunch. Guriko had kissed Sakaki Guryū and told him to stop eating Rinne's food. It made her heart pound. What was this uneasy feeling? Why did she feel so nauseous?

"Why..."

Why did Guriko kiss Sakaki? What kind of reason could she have to do this? Rinne smiled bitterly. Why was she so upset? Sakaki had kissed someone else, but why did seeing that annoy her so much?

"So annoying..."

Rinne noticed her jealousy of Guriko, and felt a bit disgusted by it. Was this what it felt like to have that which you value most threatened? This was the first time Rinne felt something like this, so it was hard to describe. "Jealousy" was the most accurate word, she figured. Rinne loved Sakaki, and seeing him kiss another girl was incredibly painful. So painful that for the time being she didn't even want to talk to Sakaki.

Even though Sakaki's feelings hadn't changed and he didn't hate Rinne, she still felt dejected. Noticing her own unreasonably poor mood, Rinne worried herself into a deeper depression. Rinne decided it was a bit like saving a cookie to enjoy later, only for someone else to eat it. She and Sakaki had only kissed once, on Sakaki's birthday. Rinne thought of that as a bond between them,

something that only she had.

However, that was no longer true. Guriko had kissed Sakaki right in front of Rinne.

“I’m so useless...”

She wanted to cry. She was already almost crying. It felt weak to be so bothered by this. She was still a weak human who trembled over such a trivial fact. Even if her body lost the ability to die, her heart was still so weak. So fragile. So powerless. So pathetic!

Realizing that obsessing over this was only going to make her feel worse, she decided not to dwell on it any longer. That’s it! Even if she avoided Sakaki today, she would greet him with a smile tomorrow! After that resolution, she felt a bit better.

Passing the bustling market, she then walked down a rough path. It was always deserted here. Only the weeds were present, and there wasn't so much as a parking lot. Rinne blankly gazed at the unchanging scenery where she used to frequently get lost as she walked, her thoughts jumbled.

“Hey, you. The young lady over there.”

A voice. Rinne turned to look. A small, mysterious stand had appeared in the empty space. Or maybe it was a shop? At least, it was covered with a plastic tarp like a tent. Inside the violet tent was a crystal ball, and sitting behind that was a robe-wearing man who gave off a strange vibe. There was a sign out front that read, “Fortune telling, 100 yen”.

“Hey, the young lady over there.”

Rinne couldn’t help but stop and turn to look at the perplexing little shop.

She was sure it hadn’t been there that morning.

The mysterious fortune teller spread out his hands and said in an ambiguous voice, “That’s right, I'm doing fortune tellings. Good

luck, ill fortune, fated events, and romantic matches are all revealed. A young lady of your age should at least know about horoscopes or blood type fortunes! Besides those, I can do fortunes with Tarot cards, normal playing cards, flower languages, or even with water flow. Your face, hands, clothes, and even the layout of your home are also taken into consideration. Just tell me your name, and I can read your fortune for you!”

Should she give it a go? — He just kept rambling on. Did he really have nothing else to do?

The price wasn’t that bad, and it’d be kind of pathetic if the fortune teller got ignored despite all his promoting. Therefore, Rinne carelessly walked into the tent. The inside was flooded with an odd, hazy light. The fortune teller gazed intently at Rinne and then at his crystal ball before announcing, “Oh, ah... this is bad!”

“What...”

I haven’t even said anything yet… she thought. The fortune teller lifted up his crystal ball and gleefully repeated, “Bad! Bad!”

“This is ominous! Usagawa Rinne-san, your fortune is doomed. It’s hellishly evil luck. The movements of the stars are terrible!”

“My name — ”

Did I tell him my name? No, I didn’t.

The fortune teller didn’t seem to notice her confusion as he blathered on, “Life is like a star. Sometimes it grows dim, while other times it shines brightly. Unfortunately, though, smaller stars are attracted to larger ones, and when they collide the smaller stars are smashed to pieces.”

He looked at Rinne with his eyes that he had been hiding behind a hood. They were red.

“Some great existences cannot be approached. A star too small will only end up crushed if it reaches for something greater. It needs to know its limits if it is to remain safe. The gravity of a giant star is great, and draws in many small stars that only end up destroyed. Only by living carefully will they live long enough to achieve a death with blinding radiance.”

“That — "

Rinne stood up, staring at the cross-legged fortune teller. “That’s - ”

“Make no mistake, it is you I speak of!”

The fortune teller wearing the violet robe gloomily addressed her in an androgynous voice, “Should you not reach out and stay your distance, you shall have an even more brilliant death.”

She realized this fortune teller was dangerous, but there were questions she had to get answered first.

“You’re saying the large star is Sensei? And the small star is me? I... can’t be with Sensei?”

After hearing Rinne’s soft, almost-crying voice, the fortune teller lips curled up in a smile.

“You seem to misunderstand.”

The so-called large star —

“Is, of course, the Apple of Eden.”

The voice came from behind her.

Rinne slowly turned her head, and saw about ten people, all with those same red eyes.

It was a bizarre scene. These emotionless and insect-like people had gathered behind her when she wasn’t paying attention. Their appearances ranged all over the place. There were children, adults, an old lady with a crooked back, a housewife who seemed to be on her way home after shopping, and a high school student in uniform. They seemed to lack a sense of self, as if they were all one. Judging by their looks alone, though, it was hard to see any correlation.

Rinne cried out softly, taking a step back. She was terrified. Just

what did these people want? She had not heard from Sakaki about his encounter with a fortune teller called Mushi, and this was her first experience with something like this. It had become quickly apparent she had been thrust into some sort of bizarre world normal humans never saw. What could she do in such a world?

Rinne shuddered as the fortune teller behind her said in a bored tone, “I don’t think resistance is going to get you anywhere. Though we Mushi do not have superhuman strength, we are not weaker than humans either. You are no match for us!”

“What are you planning to do to me?”

“We would like you to die.”

The “Mushi” in front of her that looked like an office worker responded in an identical voice. That cruel response shocked Rinne. *I’m going to be killed! I’m going to be killed!* Terror filled her body.

“In other words, we will use every method we can think of to kill you, Usagawa Rinne. Strangulation, beating, poisoning, stabbing, shooting at you to make you bleed out, or perhaps even drowning or burning you. If you still will not die… we’ll just think of something else! We’ll start with these.”

Her first thought was to ask Sakaki for help. She had his number stored in her phone, she just needed about 30 seconds to get a hold of him.

However, it didn’t seem like these things were interested in giving her those 30 seconds.

The fortune teller Mushi seemed to read her mind, and harshly told her, “I won’t let you call for help. Besides, the bodyguards Sakaki Guryū secretly sent to protect you should have already been taken care of by other Mushi. No matter how you look at it, nothing will save you. How sad — "

A mountain of terror fell upon her and she let out a hoarse scream.

The office worker Mushi wrapped his hand around Rinne’s slim

neck. She had frozen in fear. Dry, flat fingers began to squeeze painfully into her throat.

“First we’ll strangle you. Ah, it seems like you can still feel pain. How unfortunate...”

A Mushi continued, “This will hurt!”

The incredible strength of the choking gave new definition to the word “pain”. She felt like her neck was going to break in two.

She didn’t have the strength to resist and the pain had robbed her of the ability to think straight. All she could do was cry out with ear-piercing shrieks.

“... We’re just getting started. Carry the guilt of your crime to your death!”

Crime?

I committed… a crime?

That’s why I must suffer like this and die such a brutal death?

If that was the case — what crime did I commit?

Her vision became blurry and she got dizzy. At this point, she wasn’t even sure if she was still conscious. Her neck made a creaking sound. It hurt. It hurt so much.

Usagawa Rinne naturally thought of Sakaki Guryū. All she could do was think of her feelings for him and pray he could hear them — then, she could die.

Then—

A flash.

A dazzling flash shot into the back of the head of the Mushi strangling her. With violent force, the impact covered the inside of the tent with blood. In an instant, the Mushi disappeared as if it had blown up. Rinne was suddenly released, and fell to the ground in a coughing fit. She had a hard time believing the retching sounds were coming from her own throat. Wiping off the saliva from her mouth, she desperately tried to get a grasp on her surroundings. The thing in front of her—

Was spinning.

A blood-stained spoon fell to the ground.

The flash that had killed the Mushi and saved Rinne was —

— A spoon.

"... How many times do I have to say it before you blockheads get it? Killing Usagawa Rinne is pointless."

The Mushi all turned to look at the source of the voice, and so did Rinne. The voice came from the entrance to the empty lot where they were.

The person standing there was Gankyū Eguriko.

Her steely face clearly showed unhappiness. Her wolf-like hair was even more of a mess and her uniform was dirty. It seemed pretty obvious she'd just woken up from a nap. With piercing eyes and armed with several spoons, Gankyū Eguriko of class 1-B, seat eleven, shouted with her pure voice, "I can't be too careful. Even an afternoon nap is a no go now. And I was sleeping so comfortably, too. Well, have you said your prayers yet?"

At that moment—

Whoosh.

Just when Rinne thought she saw Guriko's hand move, three spoons were already streaking for the eyes of three of the Mushi. The Mushi died just like the one before, instantly bursting before disappearing. Rinne absent-mindedly thought that they kind of resembled popping balloons.

As she was thinking that, the bruises on her neck and the pain she felt disappeared as if they had never happened at all. The fortune teller Mushi clicked his tongue and confirmed it.

"Really — you won't die. How troublesome!"

"I'm out of spoons."

Guriko ignored the Mushi's words, and with a grim expression said in a low voice, "... So from now on it's going to be hand-to-hand combat. Fists aren't like spoons, they can't kill with a single hit. It's gonna hurt. A lot. If you Mushi don't want to be pummeled, then you'd better duck your tail between your legs and scram!"

The words were thick with malice. It was a voice filled with total confidence backed by powerful murderous intent that caused Rinne to stiffen in fear.

"Unfortunately —"

But the Mushi were not intimidated at all.

"—Pain and suffering are not obstacles to our goals!"

"I know. Then — I'll just wipe you all out."

And so Guriko charged forward.

Rinne shut her eyes in fear.

Leaving the public baths, Usagawa Rinne returned home feeling warm and refreshed. She tossed her towel and old clothes in the washing machine in front of her apartment. It had been left there by the previous tenant, and though it didn't work too often, it was still rather durable. Rinne picked up the key hidden under it and opened the door to her apartment. Inside it was pitch black and obviously empty. She turned on the light and let out a sigh of relief. The fear of an ambush waiting for her gradually fled from her mind. She unconsciously touched her neck that had long since stopped hurting.

"Ah..."

She stood there for a while, feeling slightly helplessness before she shook it off. She pulled out a comforter from the closet as well as a pillow, and then looked at her cell phone to check the time. 10:02 PM. Sakaki had bought her the phone, and he paid the bill as well. She always felt guilty about using it. After today, though, she really wanted to call him. Rinne stared at the phone, hesitating... Should she call, or not? It was embarrassing to call this late at night.

As she stood there, the doorbell rang. At first, she just stared at it, a bit stunned. The only reason this apartment had a doorbell at all was because the previous tenant had installed one. With a small apartment like that, it served no real purpose. Knocking would have worked just as well.

Who could it be?

The events of that day started to haunt her again and she shuddered. The horrifying fortune teller, the man who strangled her, the transfer student who killed them without a second thought, and those people called Mushi who exploded before they died. She couldn't begin to understand any of it and she didn't want to, either. The fortune teller's words cryptically repeated in her head: Some things couldn't be touched or even approached.

Now there was knocking on the door. Rinne slowly got up while thinking, *Who is it?*. She wondered if it might be the self-proclaimed musician who lived next door to her, coming again to borrow some rice.

The door opened. That's right, it wasn't even locked.

The one silently standing at the open door was—

“Guriko... chan.”

“You didn't need to add a 'chan'.”

Gankyū Eguriko spoke in a sharp tone, and had an extremely dissatisfied expression plastered on her face.

Even though she was bewildered by the unexpected visitor, Rinne still remembered that Guriko had saved her earlier that day. For that, she relaxed and loosened herself up a bit.

“What are you doing here at this hour...?”

“It’s cold outside.”

“Eh?”

“Let me live here.”

“...Eh, huh?"

The outlandish and selfish request took her by complete surprise. Guriko didn’t seem interested in waiting for an answer as she walked in, tossed off her dirty shoes, and sat down on the floor.

“... Um... Then, Guriko, what’s going on here?”

“Ugh...”

For a while, it looked like she was thinking about what to say. Guriko then sighed and expressionlessly pulled her cheek, saying in her clear voice, “Agh, I’m horrible at lying, so I’ll just tell the truth. I came here to protect you, Usagawa Rinne. The Mushi seem to have made your Apple their goal. There’re possibly other goals, but I don’t know anything about that. There are too many of them, and

since things are so dangerous I can't help but worry. In order to observe the situation and protect you, I think living here is the best idea. If you think I'm in the way, just pretend I don't exist. And so, I'll be making this place my home."

How selfish.

Rinne was shocked by Guriko, who sat there staring at her, and then shyly smiled. None of it made any sense, but one thing was clear. Saying anything more would be pointless.

"What did you mean when you said 'It's cold outside' at the beginning?"

"I planned to use that as an excuse to live here, but I can't just lie my way through life. It's actually not cold to me at all. I haven't felt temperature for a long time. Even if I slept at the South Pole, I wouldn't die, and I wouldn't feel the cold, either. But... to tell the truth… is a bit embarrassing, too."

'For the sake of protecting you' sure wasn't Guriko's style. Though, the more Rinne thought about it, the more she smiled.

Guriko blankly looked at Rinne, who tried to hide her smile.

"What are you smiling for... Ah, whatever, I'm sure you're confused, but please be patient. Once I figure out what the Mushi want and exterminate them, I'll leave... eh?"

Guriko said all that in a single breath, but suddenly turned to look toward the corner of the room. There was a giant egg wrapped with a soft cloth. It was covered with a geometric design, and seemed man-made.

Rinne glanced at the suddenly-silent Guriko with fear in her eyes and asked, "Um, what is it, Guriko-chan?"

"... Nothing."

Guriko scratched her head.

"The egg of a Dream World Beast. That's weird. Well, it shouldn't be dangerous since it's not an evil beast."

After saying those cryptic words, she got up and walked back and forth across the room.

“In short, those Mushi are going to be hard to deal with, and solving that problem is gonna take a while. Until I’m done, I’ll just stay in this closet here.”

Guriko opened the closet and laid down. She wasn't Doraemon! That place wasn’t for a girl to sleep.

Rinne dreamt up ways to convince Guriko out of the closet so they could both sleep on the futon. There was only one futon in the room, so Rinne would give the pillow to Guriko and use a cushion instead. Guriko resisted at first, but soon gave up in the face of Rinne’s stubbornness. She curled up and quickly fell asleep.

Rinne still wasn’t sure what was going on. Guriko had killed her once, and had forcefully kissed the person most important to her that morning. Despite this, Rinne never felt she was a bad person for some reason. Gently patting the sweetly sleeping Guriko on the head, Rinne felt strangely at ease.

Then Rinne thought of something, and picked up the cell phone by the pillow to text Sakaki. Then, she closed her eyes, basked in Guriko’s warmth, and fell asleep.

From ★ Usarin
To ★ Sensei
Subject ★ Edict
Body ★ Sorry for bothering you so late. This is Usarin. Sensei, something extremely scary happened today. I was attacked by a group of Mushi with red eyes, although I didn’t know what they were at the time. I was strangled and almost killed, making that the third time I almost died. Is that good luck? Or bad? I’m still alive after coming close to death so many times. Since I survived, it’s only right for me to keep living on. Sensei, I’ll do my best to stay alive.

About that incident at lunch, I think Guriko must have had some reason for doing that. I don’t know what the class thinks, but I think Guriko isn’t the type of person who would commit horrible crimes, so tomorrow I’ll ask her

about the details. I know you
told me to avoid talking to Guriko, but I want to keep talking to her.

Sensei, I don’t know what’s going on around us. It feels like there’s always some sort of terrible conspiracy, but I won’t
despair because I have you. As long as Sensei is here, I’ll keep on hoping for the best. That was our promise. I love you,
Sensei.

P.S. I got a new family member. An actual person, not a pet. Who do you think it is, Sensei? I’ll tell you tomorrow. I think you’ll
be shocked though!

And that was it.

Night 3: The Girl Who Died a Thousand Years ago

The Original Sin was the first transgression humans made against God. That sin, committed by Adam and Eve, was still not forgiven. We still bear the burden of that act as their children. Pain is how humans can redeem themselves. It was all the fault of those long dead ancestors. It doesn't matter who you are - male, female, old, young, sick, healthy, rich, or poor - pain is a part of everyone. "Believe in religion and you shall be saved!" No, it was that so religion can flourish! It's an underhanded way of preying upon people's fear and hardship to force them into believing. That's called a bad deal. Believing in religion only

helps out after you're dead, anyway. So there's no reason to believe in it while you're still alive.

"Sensei, what exactly was the Original Sin?"

Hmm. You asked a question when you don't understand something, Milady. How splendid! Everyone should learn from her! As for the answer, God, an almighty being that created all the creatures in the world, also created humans to rule over them. God saved humans for the last, using soil and a rib from His own body to construct two humans, a man and a woman. He charged these two humans, Adam and Eve, with tending an utopia called the Garden of Eden. He also gave them one warning. They could eat any of the fruit growing in the Garden save for that of the apple tree in the middle. Eating the fruit from that tree would result in death.

"Was the fruit poisonous, then?"

"No. It wasn't poisonous. Do you know the story of 'Nutgall'? It's a story about a monk who showed the younger monks a bottle and told them the content inside was the poisonous plant nutgall. Naturally, that meant it must not be eaten. However, it wasn't nutgall in the bottle at all, but the monk's stash of candy. The young monks figured it out fairly quickly and ate all of his candy. After he found out, the older man swore a storm."

"Is that meant to be a joke?"

"Every story like that is meant to be a joke. The original story probably went a lot differently, but the basic gist is the same. The fruit of the Apple Tree in the Garden of Eden wasn't poisonous. It was supposed to be reserved only for God Himself. There are several different theories as to what exactly the fruit was. Some say it enabled humans to distinguish right from wrong. Others say it granted wisdom, or even immortality. No matter what it was, the fact of the matter was that Adam and Eve ate the fruit that was meant only for God. That was the original sin, a sin of *theft*. You could probably even argue that it was false testimony as well. In any case, Adam and Eve committed the ultimate sin of betraying God, and that sin has still not been forgiven to this day. Just what was this "Apple" that God treasured so much? Despite how interesting that question is, I'll end up going off topic if I dwell on it, so we'll leave it there for today."

Ethics was the fourth class of the day for class 1-B. Sakaki Guryū, who had taken over teaching all subjects for this class, briefly went over the establishment of Judaism. Sakaki had taken this all upon himself solely so that he could spend as much time as possible with Usagawa Rinne. He got this by bullying his way through the school using the name of his family. Modern Japanese society embraced equality, and employers wouldn't discriminate against someone because of the family they were born in. However, modern Japan also embraced commercialism, and money still talked. Therefore, nobody was going to challenge the Sakaki Organization just for the sake of equality. The Sakaki Organization had the financial weight to outclass the Japanese national budget. As Sakaki Guryū was that organization's heir, it was his right to use that power as he saw fit. Besides, this high school – Kannonsakazaki Private High School – was funded by the Sakaki Organization. If the school was considered as a business, then Sakaki would be the CEO's son. With that kind of leverage, there wasn't anyone stupid enough to challenge his whims.

It was the same with students as well as teachers.

However –

"Hey you, the girl with the sinister-sounding name! Don't fall asleep!"

"Bam!" Sakaki slammed his book down upon the desk of the girl who was not only sleeping, but also snoring as if she was taunting him. She was dead asleep with her head resting on her arms. Not only that, she had been sleeping like that since the first class of the day. No student had ever slept in his class. Sakaki's pride had been significantly wounded. Not being someone that had a lot of patience to begin with, this behavior pushed Sakaki way over the line.

The class grew quiet. Ever since the "The 15th November Incident", the students had been very interested in the relationship between Sakaki Guryū and the person sleeping right now – Gankyū Eguriko. This mundane school life, this peaceful time during which nothing happened, was shattered by having a pebble thrown into this still pond, a pebble in the form of Gankyū Eguriko. What would Sakaki - the ultimate, perfect teacher - do?

Sitting next to Gankyū Eguriko, or “Guriko” as she was known, Usagawa Rinne poked the girl’s head with her finger. It was an uneven and messy head with a mass of hair cut like a wolf’s. With her lying on the table, Guriko looked just like a pile of hair. In contrast, Rinne was very clean and neat, with short hair that didn’t even reach her shoulders. These two seemed to be on good terms lately. If Rinne were to say something, Guriko would at least listen to her.

“Guriko-chan, Guriko-chan, get up.”

A clear and carrying voice with a melodic tone like a bell - that was Usagawa Rinne’s beautiful voice.

“Sensei looks like he’s a bit angry. It’s best if you get up now!”

“So loud!”

Guriko didn't move at all and declared: “I sleep when I want to sleep. It doesn’t matter to me whether the teacher is angry or if the world gets destroyed. Sleep is the greatest happiness I get. Don’t worry about it. I learned a long time ago to sleep with one eye open. Just like the last time you got jumped on by the Mushi - even though I asleep, I still knew about it.”

“Hmm...”

“...There is therefore absolutely no problem with me sleeping in the classroom. Blame the teacher with the fancy name. I don’t even want to see his face, which is why I am sleeping through class. You get a problem with that?”

“I do have a problem with that. It is extremely impolite to not listen to the teacher and sleep all day.”

Sakaki had been standing there the entire time. Making a slight thud, his merciless fist made contact with Guriko's head. Even she had to get up, rubbing her head. She stared at Sakaki.

“What?! Why did you hit me? Even if I can’t feel the pain, my head still responds to the impact. Now I'm wide awake. How are you gonna repay me, Sensei?!”

“It’s ‘Sakaki-Sensei’. Anyways, you’re not allowed to sleep during my class.”

Sakaki's words came out haughtily. An angry look fell upon Guriko's face.

"You didn't even say you were sorry! I'm pissed. You remember that, Sakaki."

I'm going to gouge out your eyeballs one day, Guriko muttered quietly to herself.

During lunch break on Friday, November the 26th, Sakaki was eating the lunch Rinne made for him. He noticed Rinne, who sat in front of him, looking rather fidgety. So he asked her, "Are you well, Milady? Does your stomach hurt?"

Rinne lifted her head to look at Sakaki in response. She wasn't eating her lunch again because of her loss of appetite. She hadn't eaten for about ten days. She had been to the doctor, but they kicked her out when they couldn't find anything wrong with her. She hadn't lost a single pound in weight and continued her energetic lifestyle, completely oblivious to his worries. This was a completely incomprehensible phenomenon; a mystery that modern science couldn't explain. Sakaki didn't understand it any better. All he could do was accept that it was supernatural and gave up on finding a rational explanation.

Rinne suddenly looked away and displayed a rare expression of hesitation.

Sakaki was a bit disturbed.

"What's wrong?"

"Um..."

With that pretty voice that Sakaki adored, Rinne asked fearfully: "Sensei, do you dislike Guriko-chan?"

"Hmm?"

What did she mean by that? There were a hundred ways of answering the question. However, he always answered her

truthfully, so Sakaki told her the truth without hesitation.

“I don’t like her and I don’t dislike her... Honestly, I just feel guarded around her. I still don’t know what she is. In many ways, she’s very inhuman. More than that, though, I don’t know her intentions. For me, she’s already beyond forgiveness just because she hurt you. Also, her personality is so self-centered it always feels like she’s looking down on me, which really gets on my nerves. There’s no way I’d be able to get along with her.”

“Is that so...?”

Rinne’s expression was slightly at a loss.

“Then Sensei, didn’t you once say that Guriko-chan arrived at this school in order to trick me? You said she was getting close to me so she can pull something – ”

“I didn’t say it like that – ”

“You did!”

In a rare show of anger, Rinne said: “It’s just that Guriko-chan isn’t good with people. I think she actually wants to get along with Sensei. Despite the fact she killed me and that mess with the lunches, she must have had some reasons that we don’t know about. Guriko-chan would never want us to be unhappy! After living together with her, I know she isn’t a bad girl!”

“Milady, you are taking her side!!”

“Sensei, you are being paranoid!!”

Rinne said loudly. This was quite an incredible reaction for her. She was apparently angry, and angry enough to yell at Sakaki at that. Sakaki felt his heart churn as he couldn’t figure out how he had upset her so. He just wanted Rinne to be safe. Couldn’t she see that? No, she definitely understood that. Rinne wasn’t stupid. She understood his intentions, but it was upsetting her.

Rinne kept her head bowed and continued. “I know Sensei cares about me. I’m glad, and I feel like I owe Sensei the benefit of the doubt, but still –”

All of a sudden, her tone became gentle and she pressed her hand on her forehead, like something had immediately calmed her down.

"– Aaa, no, I didn't mean that... but Sensei, please, please stop suspecting Guriko-chan. She definitely isn't going to hurt me again."

"But how can you be so sure?"

Just how could she come to that conclusion? Why would she believe Guriko so easily? *That person has already killed you once, Milady Usarin. Killed you by gouging out your eyeball. How can you still believe such a horrifying demon?*

Rinne had her head lowered for a long time, and said quietly: "Sensei, Guriko-chan –"

Her voice was very sad.

"She cries all through the night! She yells things out loud while tossing and turning in her nightmares. She would say, 'I don't want to live anymore! Kill me! Kill me! I want to die! I can't take this any moooooooore! Kill me, kill me, kill me!' She would be in anguish until dawn. It doesn't look like she remembers it, though. I think the reason Guriko-chan sleeps all day must be because she can't sleep peacefully at night... Sensei, do you think such poor girl is a devil that wants to kill me?"

Rinne's shoulders were shaking. Although she didn't physically cry, her heart seemed to weep.

Sakaki looked pained, but he still couldn't trust Guriko.

"That is also – acting."

"Something like that isn't acting! ...Something like that isn't acting." Rinne repeated, muttering as if she was talking to the air.

"... Don't fight. It'll attract the Mushi."

A clear and pure voice that drowned out every other noise called from across the room.

Rinne turned her head towards the voice, and Sakaki followed her gaze. Guriko, who disappeared a while ago, was pulling open the classroom door with a squeak. She walked towards them.

As she walked, she rambled on.

"The Mushi are everywhere, even here in this classroom. Those things will do anything to obtain their goal, so they'll make their

move at the first signs of weakness. Don't fight. Your advantage is that your love is so strong, so don't lose that."

"You're the reason we're fighting!"

"What?"

Surprise fell upon Guriko's face. She then brushed away her bangs and stared at Sakaki with her incredibly colored eyes. It might be irrelevant, but this girl really wasn't suited for a cute sailor uniform.

"You're fighting because of me? Ah, you're still hung up on that lunch thing? Sorry, but I had to do that to keep you two alive. On second thought, though, maybe I should have just let this guy die. Why did I save him? He's clearly a loser."

'This guy' and 'loser' were all unmistakably referring to Sakaki, because Guriko's finger was pointed at him at the same time. Why did she say things to make him angry? It was the first time in Sakaki's life that he'd been called a 'loser'.

Rinne noticed that Sakaki was displeased, and a helpless expression showed up on her face.

"Guriko-chan, why did you say that? It's better to be honest with yourself – I know you want to get along with Sensei, so you shouldn't say things like that!"

"Don't –"

Guriko probably wanted to rebuke her with 'don't talk nonsense', but Rinne was quicker and muted the girl's words with her own angelic smile.

"I like Guriko-chan a lot!"

Rinne said naturally, "I want to be good friends with you, so don't worry, I won't hurt you! Sensei thinks the same way. I know it."

Sakaki complained with a furrowed brow: "Milady, I still want to veto this speech of yours."

"Sensei is so stubborn. Guriko-chan and Sensei are really similar! Both of you are obviously good people, but you are distant from each other because you can't be honest to each other. That's such a pity! You two should really get along, but you can't because you're

both stubborn. How sad... ”

Rinne’s face was still helpless, but she laughed as she spoke with a confident tone.

“Huh...?”

“Yeah…?”

Her proclamation made the other two gape at her. Both of them had expressions like they were trying to think of ways to deny the optimistic girl’s words.

Rinne noticed the two had the same expression and thought *They are definitely similar!* She then smiled gently.

These were sad memories.

“... You’re expendable” – I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve heard those words.

Yes, Mother, I’m expendable to you. Let the gods of plague and poverty fall upon me alone, sparing my family. Eat me if you must eat someone. I’m an adopted child anyways.

If the family could no longer support the children, I would be sacrificed without a second thought.

If I’m going to die, then let me die protecting my family!

It was a year of rampant sickness. Everyone was frail and weak. Their eyes were sunken in, and their skin was pale. The rural countryside, which barely sustained life as it was, felt a wave of death from this disease. Once someone got sick, then their land would die with them. For a poor village, this was a matter of life and death. My family, however, were robust people. They turned a blind eye to the pestilence as if it didn’t concern them. However, I was much more susceptible, and I was locked up in a small stone-walled room. “Don’t come out! You’ll get sick!” Of course, it wasn’t out of concern for my safety that they said that. Mother was afraid that if I catch the disease, I would pass it on to other people in the

family.

“You are expendable,” Mother said. “It'd be enough if you're the only one suffering. Don’t bring us down with you.”

I know, Mother. I understand. Although my family treated me like dirt, they still gave me food to eat and a bed to sleep in. I knew God would punish me for being selfish if I asked for anything more. I like the people in this family. I would be very sad if misfortune fell on them because of me. It sounds pathetic, but those were my thoughts.

The stone room was wet and the air was stuffy. I sat on the ice-cold rock and fought against the chills. *It’s so dark in here. I can’t even see my own hands.* I hugged my knees and cried constantly to chase away the cold.

It wasn’t that I feared the dark. It was that I was very lonely.

Just how long had it been since I was put here? I sensed something was wrong. I could hear a lot of commotion coming from outside of the room. *What’s going on?* I knocked on the wood panels blocking the entrance out of fear. Father, Mother, my older brothers - what had happened to them?

A deep and gloomy voice, one that was completely novel to me, responded,

“My my, I was wondering where you might be. You’ve been locked up in that stone room all along!”

It wasn’t a man’s voice, but it wasn’t a woman’s either. It was a voice that unnerved the listener.

“Boom!” – the wood panels were shattered easily. I could see the shadow of a person standing between me and the daylight. My body was shaking, and I took a few steps backwards. I then tripped on something and lost my balance, so that person grabbed me and held me up with both hands, laughing.

“Alright, time to give it back!”

That was what he said. There was a red glow shimmering in that guy’s eyes, and he didn’t look human. My gaze moved beyond him and saw a terrible sight. My father had his neck snapped. My mother was lying with her belly sliced open. My elder brothers

were casually piled upon each other on the floor. Everyone was dead. I screamed.

Uncaring of my screams, the red-eyed person remained gloomily silent.

He seemed to be looking for me. He killed my whole family just because they were in the way of his search for me.

He's such a... villain. He's... horrible.

And that horrible villain was looking at me expressionlessly.

"Let's confirm it first!"

A deep voice sounded right into my ears.

Then he grabbed my screaming throat and my vision dimmed.

... Misfortune should have just been limited for me. Father, Mother, brothers... I'm sorry.

Opening her eyes, Guriko saw only the endless sky. Her hand went to her neck unconsciously as her eyes narrowed in the blinding light. Her throat, which should have been crushed, didn't even have a bruise on it. Such things had disappeared long ago.

"... So it was a dream."

Gankyū Eguriko muttered as she laid face-up on the roof of the Kannonsakazaki Private High School school building, watching the birds and the occasional plane passing above.

It seemed she dreamt of the past while she was dozing. It was maddening – it was a distant memory from when she was still human, back when she had parents and brothers. That had been a millennium ago. It was a vague memory she had almost forgotten –

Three birds flew past. They flew in front of the sun, so all she saw of them were their black silhouettes.

She murmured to herself as she reminisced on the past.

“Birds don’t change. They kept their shape the entire time. Humans, on the other hand, have changed a lot. What about me? Is there anything in me that’s different from back then? Of course things changed. I laughed easily back then. I had things that were important to me. I was happy. When did I begin to leave all that behind? When did I lose it?”

“How long am I supposed to live?” Guriko muttered as she continued to watch the birds.

Three birds. Three creatures that lived by eating worms. These animals never stopped being birds. They were the same as they were all those years ago. I, however, had long ago ceased to be human.

“The three birds were reduced to two, and now I’m the only one left. It doesn’t matter if I’m alone. I don’t want Rinne to be a part of this, but the Apple had already taken root in her. It’s just like what happened to me – it’s too late now. Whatever happens now is just going to lead to misfortune. Change into a bird, or die with humans...”

Guriko stood up with a wobble, her eyes still fixed upon the birds flying away into the distance.

“... It should have been fine with me being the only unfortunate one!”

Guriko repeated those words she so spoke so often.

“Seeing her crying face... it hurts me too much.”

Guriko put her hand on her chest.

“But I must tell her the truth.”

She was used to being despised, and she knew there wouldn’t be any reward for her actions.

The hours flew by as she sorted through letters and cleaned up her work area. Her shift over, Usagawa Rinne left the post office after saying goodbye to her colleagues. She enjoyed this job quite a bit.

Despite the work being a bit repetitive, it got pretty fun after she became used to it. Also, everyone working there was really nice. Checking her cell phone, she saw it was already after 8 o'clock and the sun had set long ago. Rinne got on her bike, which was parked behind the post office, and took off down the uneven streets, leaving white puffs of breath as a trail in the air behind her. It wasn't too late, although there were very few people on the street and most of the shops had closed down. Occasionally there would be the stray pedestrian, waddling home from work with a weary expression on their face.

It used to be that Rinne would also be extremely tired after finishing work, but now she wasn't even feeling weary. *With no appetite, automatically healing for any, and even losing the sense fatigue - do I still count as a human?* These thoughts made her feel sad.

Rinne didn't know what Sakaki thought of all this, and she was rather puzzled herself. What kind of conspiracy did she get herself into? What was happening to her? Who is Guriko-chan? She really wanted to know these things. This wasn't something she took lightly. She seriously wanted to know the truth.

However, thinking about it wasn't getting her anywhere. Despite analysing what Gurkio-chan and the Mushi had said, she couldn't figure it out. Whether it was a lack of imagination or just being plain dumb, the answer was out of her reach. Rinne was almost out of options.

The ten-minute-long commute wasn't long enough to think things through. Before she managed to organize her uneasy questions, Rinne was already home. Was Guriko-chan there already? It felt nice to have someone waiting for her in the house.

"I'm home!"

Rinne spoke as she opened the door and took off her shoes at the entrance. As she expected, she heard a familiar, chirpy tune. Guriko-chan was sitting in front of the very large television that really stuck out from the rest of the room, and she was playing a video game. She was playing on an old console that stores now sold at a really cheap price. The system was only around 300 yen and the game she bought was only 100 yen. 400 yen covered everything. The game she was playing was 'Obake no Q-tarō'.

The wobbling and adorable little Q-tarō wandered across the

screen, but it soon hit the dog and it was Game Over. It looked like Guriko-chan didn't really know how to play video games. Considering she had never seen any before, that was fairly understandable.

Without turning around, Guriko immediately started the game again and asked Rinne, "Did you have to work today too?"

"Mmm, yeah, I was at work."

Rinne put her coat on a hanger and then sat down next to Guriko, watching Q-tarō lose to the dog again. She really hadn't gotten a grasp on the game yet.

Guriko's face wasn't happy.

"... This is pretty boring. I can't win against the dog. The problem is I don't have any attacks. How am I supposed to get past him, Rinne? Do you know?"

"... The instructions said that pressing A twice will make you fly, and pressing B will make you disappear. So, just use those two abilities... Aah, right there! Use the fly to dodge, ah – too bad!"

"Ahh... "

With a serious face, Guriko-chan played for a good while after that. Unfortunately, though, there didn't seem to be much improvement. She finally gave up after a while and unplugged the system before turning to Rinne and looking at her.

"Rinne, I've given it some thought."

"... Given what some thought?"

"I've been withholding the truth, but I've reached my limit."

Guriko asked innocently, "Do you have the courage to hear the truth?"

Rinne didn't speak a word.

"You'll probably end up cursing your fate once you know the truth But if you think you can take it, then I'll tell you. I'm afraid I'll ruin your happiness. I don't want to make you lose what you have with Sakaki by telling you this. But that's a bit naïve. You've already received the Apple. As for knowing the truth, not only do you have

the right, it is also your – duty."

"Mmm..."

Rinne knew Guriko-chan's expression was a serious one. She couldn't be lying to Rinne. *She'll definitely tell me the truth as long as I say that I want to know. But – I'm so scared. There's an irrational fear, as if Guriko-chan's words would shatter the peace of this world.* That was what she felt.

"Tell me."

However, Rinne answered without hesitation.

"I hate to be in the dark like this, no matter how cruel the truth is. Tell me the truth, Guriko-chan. I'd rather face the truth, instead of being afraid of what I don't know."

"You're really tough!"

Guriko smiled softly. It was a very natural smile.

"Will you believe me? You won't yell at me and say that I'm lying to you? You will believe me no matter how cruel the truth I tell you turn out to be?"

"I will believe you!"

"Thank you –"

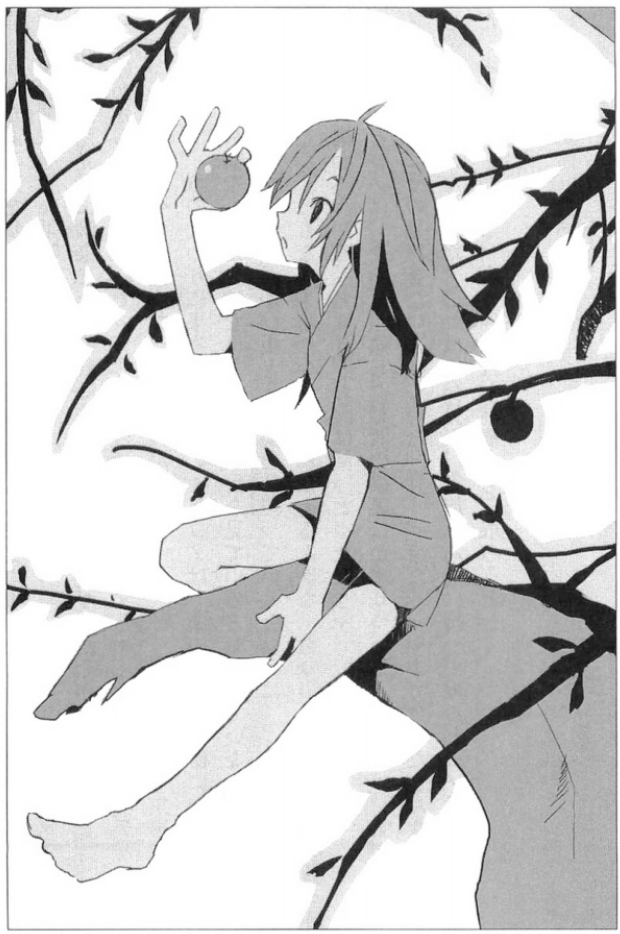
Guriko-chan's face turned serious again.

"– Then I'll also believe in you. I believe that you will overcome fate."

It is said that once a human dies, they shall start on a journey. Some people go to gardens, some go on a boat and cross rivers, and there are also those who walk on a long straight road. Such scenes are illusions created by the brain, just like a dream. And there is always a great tree in that illusion.

When Gankyū Eguriko was still known as Yono (a surname that she

discarded when she left her village behind a thousand years ago), she tripped on a moss-covered rock and fell into the river while fishing. She swallowed a lot of water and hit her head hard. It almost killed her. She dreamed, then, of walking along an uneven road and eventually coming to face a giant tree filled with fruit.



“Wow, this fruit looks really good.”

She said that as she gazed upon the fruit of the tree. They looked quite appealing in the unsettling scene around her.

“I don’t know who owns these, but it shouldn’t hurt if I just take one, right? Father’s been beat down by the weather. He could use

some of these fruits to get his strength back."

It would be pretty special if she brings back fruits instead of fish, anyways! Yono made up her mind, then climbed nimbly up the large tree and plucked an apple low to the ground. She didn't realize that she was dreaming. In reality, she was floating in a pool of water at the foot of a waterfall, covered in blood and hovering on the edge of death.

"Hmm – I've never seen this kind of fruit. Is it good to eat? Well, I'll try it. Just one can't hurt, right? My tummy's growling anyways."

"Crunch", Yono bit right into the red, ripe forbidden fruit. It was so yummy! She ate the entire thing before she realized it. It had been the tastiest, most refreshing, and juiciest fruit she'd ever eaten. Yono was overjoyed. This was such a big discovery. She should bring some back to her family! So she stretched out her hand to pluck four more apples – only to woke up from her dream, having been returned to life.

The pouring waterfall sprayed right onto her face as soon as she opened her eyes. She was floating in pool like a fishing buoy, bobbling constantly.

"It was… a dream?"

Yono muttered. The sharp pain in her head made her eyes roll backwards a bit. Fortunately, the water wasn't very deep, and she could stand in it. It wasn't difficult to get back to land.

"So – I slipped while catching fish..."

Yono was frightened of the large amount of blood she had lost as she wrung her drenched clothes dry. She was on the verge of tears the entire time.

"I had - such a strange dream. What was that about?"

Yono thought about it for a while, then returned home and to her mundane daily life. She soon forgot all about that incredible dream. It was five years later when she finally thought of that dream again.

That forbidden fruit was called "Apple of Eden", or simply "the Apple". Actually, it wasn't an apple at all. It was only called that due to its appearance. Those who eat that Apple will be granted the power of immortality. They would not die even if their heads were crushed, their hearts torn out, or if they starve or suffocate. They will not age and will live forever, regardless of the passage of years. It was also impossible for these people to escape the curse of immortality. The fact that Guriko herself hadn't reached adulthood after living for over a thousand years was proof of this.

Guriko – Yono - ate the Apple when she was a child. However, the Apple didn't grant immortality a human instantly. Should the person die before the Apple took root, the person would still perish. In fact, this was why Guirko tried to kill Usagawa Rinne. Eternal life was a fate worse than death. Rather than letting the girl suffer, it was better to kill her quickly! That was Guriko's style of cruel kindness. She truly acted out of pity. However, her plan failed. Rinne's Apple had already taken hold, and even Guriko could not kill her.

The place the Apple took root was in the soul and not the flesh, so the Apple can not be taken away no matter what happens to the body. The Apple can also affect causality and bestow special powers, such as Guriko's combat ability. That was why Guriko could slip into the school so easily. It seems the more Apples a person had, the more powerful the effect. The reason Guriko had such extraordinary powers was due to the fact she had three Apples.

Three Apples. Usually, that would mean Guriko had once taken Apples from two other people. However, it wasn't stealing so much as receiving two gifts. Guriko had traveled with these two people, a man and a woman, for a very long time. Those two each had an Apple, and seemed to have wandered the world since a long, long time ago. They decided to travel with Guriko after she saved them from the Mushi. Their families had also been slaughtered by the Mushi, and they were left wanting answers.

But after seven hundred years, the mind of the woman deteriorated and she chose to end her life. She disappeared into nothingness after entrusting her Apple to Guriko. The man who loved her also lost the will to live on, and he too passed his Apple to Guriko, ending his journey. After that, Guriko lived for about three hundred years by herself.

Guriko didn't have anyone she could entrust the Apples to, so she traveled around the world and fought the Mushi to avenge her family. The Mushi was the common enemy of all humans with Apples. In order to kill the other Apple holders on time, Guriko sought them out while hunting the Mushi. It should have been fine with just her being immortal. The so-called immortality was nothing but absolute misery. Guriko shouldn't have eaten that damned Apple to begin with. The girl who died a thousand years ago lived till now in this fashion. Having lost everything that was important to her, Guriko wandered through time waging her solitary war against the Mushi.

Usagawa Rinne's face paled as she heard this cruel reality. She then brought up a question that was heavy on her mind.

"The Mushi – what are they?"

"I don't know."

Guriko replied honestly. It was definitely not an answer Rinne expected.

Faced with Rinne, who was flabbergasted at this reply, Guriko was apologetic.

"I really don't know anything about those things. Even the two travelers who guided me seemed to not know much, only that those things are everywhere and they only act in order to take humans' Apples. You seem to have been under surveillance for a long time, too. I started investigating this place because this town has a lot of Mushi, then I discovered you. That's how all this started –"

Guriko ran her hand through her wolf-like hair and then said seriously: "But those things are definite the enemy of those of us with Apples, and they will do everything they can to get the Apples! I've come across two others who had Apples in the past. One was killed by the Mushi. The Mushi had somehow extracted the soul of the other, leaving a corpse behind. After all, the Apple takes root in the soul. Once the soul is gone, everything is over."

"Is the soul something that can be taken away?"

"I don't know, but I think there must be a way. The Mushi have definitely managed to steal many people's Apples."

Guirko said that in an uncaring voice as if it didn't matter, even if

she had no idea how the Mushi managed it.

Usagawa Rinne thought about this girl sitting in front of her. Gankyū Eguriko was a lone soldier who wandered the Earth for a millennium. She felt sorry for Guriko. Life must have been so hard and painful for Guriko!

Rinne hugged Guriko tightly.

Although Guriko mumbled a complain, she stopped refusing Rinne's hug when she found that Rinne was crying.

“Guriko-chan...”

“Mmm.”

“You must be very lonely, and in such pain!”

”Mmm –”

Guriko placed her head on Rinne’s chest, exasperated. The girl who died a thousand years ago had all her family killed. She was unable to connect to anyone, and was parted from the companions she cared for. Even so, she never gave up and managed to live on. Rinne thought this was an amazing feat. It was definitely something that deserved respect.

And it was also very sad.

Why did Guriko-chan have to endure this pain?

Rinne sobbed. This kind girl of sixteen years gave all of her tears to the lonely girl who fought continuously for ten centuries. Rinne pitied Guriko and wanted to show Guriko all the kindness she could. In order to even slightly heal Guriko’s heart, no doubt ravaged by scars, Rinne hugged Guriko tightly.

I want to give Guriko the will to live on, just like what Sakaki did for me last year. Rinne thought.

Guriko must have understood that. Silently, she let Rinne hug her.

“... Rinne.”

A short while latter, Guriko murmured softly. Her words became a coarse whisper as if she were suppressing her emotions, as if speaking those words wounded her deeply.

“Now you, too, can no longer die.”

”Mmm –”

Rinne murmured. Although she still couldn’t accept such heavy news, she understood that she could no longer live as calmly as she had previously.

The world was no longer the same for her.

Guriko remained in Rinne’s arms and said with a quavering voice: “So now you have two choices. One is to live with me forever, and the other is to disappear after you give up your soul to the Mushi. There is no salvation either way, and I can’t tell you if either will bring you any joy. You need to decide for yourself…”

Guriko moved away from Rinne a bit, and looked at her with innocent eyes.

“No matter what you choose, you will eventually lose Sakaki. Your life is endless, but his is not. One day, when Sakaki’s time reaches its end, he’ll leave you behind and die.”

Rinne nodded. Her eyes were once again brimming with tears, which slid down her cheek and dripped to the ground from her chin.

Then, a solemn expression appeared on Guriko’s face.

“If it is you wish, then I will protect you two until Sakaki dies! No matter which choice you make, I will still do that for you. You can create happy memories with Sakaki, and you can even stay beside him until he dies of old age. Then it would be up to you to whether travel with me or give your soul to the Mushi. I’ll help you the best I can.”

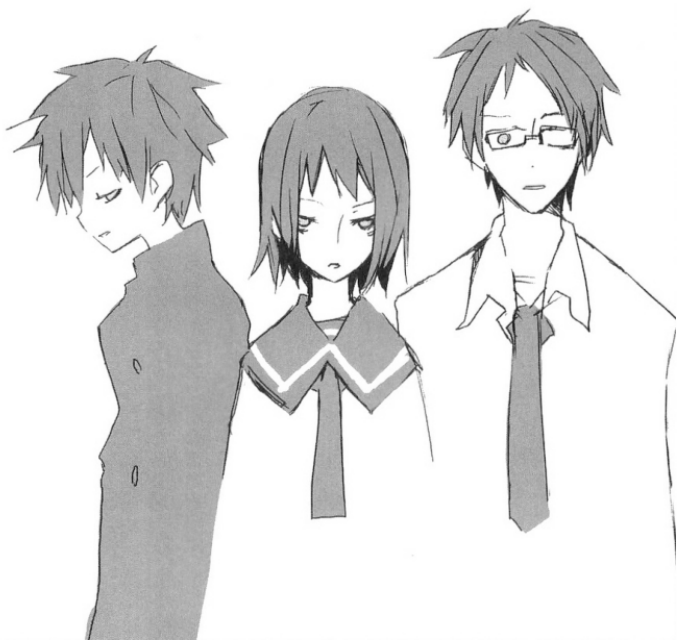
“Let me think about it a bit more.”

Rinne replied. She still couldn’t get her thoughts straight.

Guriko nodded.

“You can think about it for as long as you like… after all, time is no longer an issue.”

Night 4: Loneliness ← Kodoku → Insect Poison



As the season had already changed into winter, the air in the school corridors seemed particularly cold late at night. Even the blurry scene that seemed to levitate in the darkness gave off a feeling of piercing chill. Kannonsakazaki Private High School was a plain, ordinary place, the kind of place people imagined when they talked about a school that never got any praises or criticisms from anyone. But this ordinary school was currently the location of an incongruously strange scene. The moonlight pouring in through the

window made the corridor glisten with light as if it was a mirror. A few humanoid figures were wobbling along the bright corridor.

There were about ten teenagers here. They were most likely the school's students, as they were all wearing the uniforms of Kannonsakazaki High School! These boys and girls had a similar, unfocused expression on all of their faces, stumbling along as if they were the risen dead. Their visages were full of gloom, apparently having lost their conscious.

Their leader was the only person who was dressed oddly among these students in uniform. He wore a long purple robe, held a large crystal ball in his hands, and his red eyes sparkled with residue light in the darkness.

He was indeed the mysterious fortune teller who gave the Dream World Beast to Sakaki Guryū, who then tried to kill Usagawa Rinne and survived Guriko's attack. He did not wear his hood this time. His young, expressionless face was exposed.

This macabre team, led by the fortune teller, marched forward. They soon arrived at the third floor and stopped in front of a sealed classroom, which no one usually approached. There was not a single word of conversation despite the amount of people gathered here. The surroundings were enveloped in a frightening stillness.

The fortune teller then broke the silence and said: "… I see. It is indeed something very vicious!"

No one answered his words. The fortune teller gave a look, urging a boy with a particularly thick build to step forward. The boy held a rough and large axe in his hands. The door of the sealed classroom had wooden panels nailed onto it to forbid people from entering. The boy lifted the axe and chopped downwards chaotically, destroying the door. The sound of him hacking away, as if intending to break the others' eardrums, echoed in the silent school for a long time.

'Clack', the wooden panel made a mighty noise, and the door was completely smashed. Age-old thick dust filled up the air, but the fortune teller did not mind it at all. He spoke to the students behind him: "hurry, the door's open, get inside –"

Without a word, the students, their faces filled with lifeless and blank expressions, obeyed the fortune teller's words and walked into the empty abandoned classroom.

There was a strange rumor concerning this sealed classroom. Reputedly, all the students who broke into this abandoned classroom for fun had strangely disappeared. This rumor appeared to be confirmed by the fortune teller. 'Something evil' was indeed within this classroom. It was an existence that should never have been born in this world, something called a monster. This was an existence similar to that of the fortune teller.

"… Come, I'm here to bring offerings. This is prepared especially for you. Please enjoy yourself. Please also forgive me for having already taken their souls - the best way to successfully control humans is to suck away the soul and make them into zombies, after all! You're not the type to eat souls anyway, Legion Bandanna, for you are a demonic beast of blood and flesh –"

The fortune teller spoke into the darkness that formed whirlpools inside the classroom. Upon closer inspection, the students standing dazedly in the classroom were being devored by the darkness one by one, and their figures disappeared. It looked to be truly hungry. Human were cruel indeed, locking it up here and not even giving it food. In the pitch dark classroom, Legion Bandanna's hunger and hatred were raised to the ultimate level.

With a satisfied expression on his face, the fortune teller looked almost as if he was appreciating the demonic beast that was savoring the students as it devored them.

Unknown to him, someone was standing behind him.

"… What are you doing?"

"Oh dear."

The fortune teller turned his head. A red-haired woman, about twenty years old, was standing there.

It was a Mushi. It probably discovered that something odd was happening in the school and came to ascertain the situation.

The fortune teller waved a hand nonchalantly and spoke to the Mushi with the female appearance: “What’s wrong? Did you need to come to this school for something?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m asking what you are doing.”

The Mushi was unmoved, and nor did the expression on its face change.

“What’s your intention in feeding the carnivorous beast? You should know the danger in this, right? If it’s just a pointless game, then you must be disciplined as a fellow Mushi –”

Just then, the expression on the Mushi’s face froze.

“You –”

Have they discovered me yet?

“Wait. Who are you? You're not a Mushi – you are not one of us.”

The fortune teller moved with a lightning quick speed that human eyes wouldn’t be able to see. It was a speed that the Mushi, whose physical abilities are not any higher than an average human's, could never have. The crystal ball immediately dropped on the ground, making a loud sound.

The Mushi opened its red eyes wide in shock.

“Wha –”

“I won't be stopped here!”

The sound came from behind the Mushi.

“– This is for **my** purpose.”

Then, the fortune teller bit deeply into the slender neck of the Mushi with his vicious teeth. The Mushi gave out dying shrieks, clawed the air frantically, but it was useless no matter how it struggled –

The Mushi soon disintegrated into thin air.

“… Ah, don’t worry about this!”

The fortune teller spoke into the pitch dark classroom with a gloomy voice.

“Keep on enjoying your food till you’re full.”

Then he laughed. It was a very evil - no, a laugh filled with pure evil.

Her life was changing. The town had always felt so old and without charisma before she met Sakaki Guryū, just like how it was starting to feel now. That was how she always felt her entire life. Was her life going back to the way it was before? Usagawa Rinne sighed, then wiped away the tears that trickled down without her noticing.

The time was 7:50pm, almost eight o’clock. Having just finished her work at the fastfood outlet, Rinne was currently riding the bicycle she hasn’t used for many years, which was creaking with weird sounds. Every method of keeping herself warm was useless in the winter city after sunset. Rinne hunched up her body, enduring the chilling air that seemed to almost erode into her skin. Apparently she still had some residue feelings of ‘pain’ concerning temperature.

According to Guriko, it seems it will take a long time for those sensations to disappear.

However, the heartache won't disappear.

"What... should I do?"

She muttered as if she were speaking about someone else.

What should I do?

She had always regarded herself as a different existence before she met Guryū. This 'difference' wasn't in a good way, but in a bad way, as if she was a blemished work, a failure, a malfunctioning object, or a piece of crap. She only realized she was definitely not that different after meeting Guryū. There were no such thing like 'a different existence', no such things as a 'good' or 'bad' difference. Everyone breathes, eats, sleeps, and lives in the same way. It was humanity itself that used poverty, personality, social status, and thought processes to classify itself. When she was fifteen, she obeyed these whimsical distinctions humans made, thinking that she was different, thinking that she was not worthy, that she was useless, and therefore she desired death. She only understood how to enjoy an ordinary life after she met Guryū and felt that she wasn't different, just another ordinary human.

However – she was no longer an ordinary human. How can someone who has eternal life be ordinary? She hadn't eaten anything, but can still move and speak. Does such a creature count as human? How can it be? How can it be!

"Sensei..."

She was thinking of Sakaki, her beloved.

Humans will always part from one another. Even if they do nothing, separation will come in the form of 'death'. Although Rinne could understand such things, she never thought about it before. They won't be in a teacher-and-student relationship once she graduates from high school. They would become a ordinary couple, and will one day marry and be together forever. They just have some uncertain, sweet dreams. They were not thinking about the separation that will arrive one day at long last. But now she had to think of death and separation. She had to think how she, who won't even be granted death, will part with Sakaki. One day Sakaki will die, but she could not. Therefore, she must decide on when she will

bid farewell to him. Rinne's tears fell splattering to the ground.

"No..."

No, no, no, Rinne murmured. The bicycle crossed the shopping street, galloping on the uneven ground. The moonlight shone down silently, the grass waved with a rustle, but Rinne was not in the mood to enjoy this scene.

"How can this be? How can this be..."

It was rare for Rinne to speak such pessimistic words.

She suddenly wanted to see Sakaki very much.

I used to want a teddy bear very much, Rinne had said.

What's a teddy bear? Guriko asked without looking at Rinne. Her eyes were focused on the television in front of her, where the little Kirby avatar was jumping cutely. After yesterday's 'Obake no Q-Tarō', Guriko was challenging action games again today. She was probably getting used to it, and her hands on the controller were now far more dexterous.

Rinne still couldn't decide her future after listening to Guriko talking about the truth yesterday. There were many choices. She could stay beside Sakaki until he dies and travel with Guriko afterwards. She could also choose not go with Guriko after Sakaki's death and pass her soul to the Mushi. Or, as their relationship wasn't very intimate yet and the separation won't hurt too deeply, she many even leave Sakaki's side tomorrow. However, although she can easily think up these choices, she couldn't make a choice as she loves Sakaki very much.

He saved Rinne's life. He was her object of admiration, her most important person in the world.

"This thing, this 'teddy bear'..."

Rinne was speaking of the past. She felt she wanted to talk about it. Although Guriko didn't reply, it seemed she was listening

attentively and would ask as soon as she has questions.

“It’s a toy, a bear toy! Because it’s made in a very abstract way, it doesn’t really look like a real bear anymore – I used to want it very much. As to why I wanted it... I can’t remember the reason anymore.”

“That’s how everyone was like when they were young!”

Guriko, clad in pajamas, controlled Kirby as she said words that made Rinne feel the weight of Guriko's age.

“A child’s world is actually very small. Even if it’s something that is boring and infinitesimal for adults, children would feel it’s an important existence that can’t be ignored, right?”

“That’s right!”

Rinne smiled and laid across the prepared futon. The heated kotatsu table had long ago been pushed to the corner of the room, and the preparations before sleep were already complete.

“It’s probably just like that. But my dad – I didn’t have a mom - he didn’t understand my thoughts, and told me off very harshly: ‘Don’t ask for such things’. Since I couldn’t understand it, I kept throwing fits. That was probably... the beginning of it all.”

It was 8:30pm. Guriko had been playing video games from when she came back from school. If she was told: “you’re gonna hurt your eyes!’, she would reply: ‘They’ll recover on their own.”, which was true for her!

“It just went all downhill after that. As I grew up, my personality also became very distorted. I became a person without interests. I always felt that the entire world refused to acknowledge me, and no one is listening to me. I became entangled in this paranoia and began to be afraid, and began to distance myself from others...”

Based on Rinne's current personality, it was very hard to imagine her acting like what she was describing. However, Rinne really did live through such a time. Back then, she hated others, hated herself, and hated the world.

She even hated the fact that she was alive.

“There was no place for me in school, and I couldn’t get any solace

at home. Plus there was nothing I liked or was interested in. I just kept accumulating stress. Stress is very scary, Guriko. It's definitely a monster. The monster named stress continued to erode and gnaw away at my heart, and then I became someone full of spite."

"Since I didn't have the courage to be rebellious, I could only lock myself in my room and passively resist. Though it was boring to stay in my room, it wasn't painful either, so I kept staying inside my locked room. Dad couldn't understand me. He swore at me whenever he was angry, saying I was you piece of crap while he beat me, or he told me to go to school while kicking me."

That was then Rinne completely snapped.

She knew that. even if she kept living, there was nothing good left in her life.

Then end it all, she thought.

"Had I not met Sakaki-sensei, I would probably be already dead. I went to the ocean during winter, when there was absolutely no one else around. I was walking on the empty wave cutters, thinking of where I would kill myself. I wanted to die. I wanted to commit suicide. Now that I think about it, it was really scary, but back then I really did snap!"

Or maybe she was mad. Rinne gave a small smile. Kirby fell into a hole and died on the television screen. Play again! But there were no such second chances in life.

"... I jumped in, trying to drown myself. I walked to the side of the wave cutters and jumped, aiming for the deep water. I didn't hope to be saved, and I didn't think anyone would save me. The sea water was so cold, cold enough to kill someone from the temperature alone. I remember it very vividly. But all I felt then was that it was so cold."

"Death is not warm!" Rinne said.

"That's obvious!" Guriko said coldly.

"But some people believe death is warm and happy. There are crazy people who think being dead would grant them more happiness than living."

"I know."

Guriko said evenly. Confusion emerged on Rinne's face.

"I tried to die a few times too. I still want to die. There's nothing important for me in life, and I don't know what I'm living for. I long for the concept of death very much."

The reborn Kirby was walking forward in high spirits.

Guriko smiled unconsciously.

"So I'm a bit jealous of you. You have something important to you. You're using that important existence – Sakaki Guryū - as your pillar of existence, and you managed to continue living in happiness. I'm jealous, and I miss having someone important to me. It is the beautiful feeling that I left behind a long long time ago. That's reasonable. Right now, for me –"

Guriko suddenly had a lost expression.

"– there isn't anything or anyone important."

But then, why did Guriko stay alive? Rinne tried to think. The reason Guriko was alive was probably due to the fact that she 'can't die', not that she 'wanted to live', right? This thought was just too pessimistic. This girl, in order to protect Apple-holders from the threat of Mushi and also to avenge her family, lived on simply because of duty, destiny, and hatred. *But I feel she is very tough and very gentle.* Guriko didn't escape death, and she had fought alone to prevent her own misfortunes from occurring again.

"Guriko."

"What?"

"Guriko, I –"

Rinne spoke from the depths of her heart: "– can't I be someone important to you?"

"Hmm..."

Guriko gave Rinne a look. It was the look of a stray kitten picked up from the street, wanting to act cute but weary of humans at the same time. It was an expression that showed she wanted to rely on someone but was fearful at the same time, mixed in with some clumsiness.

“I don’t know...”

Guriko’s gaze returned to the television.

“I like you. I haven’t met anyone I like for a long time, but I have been separated from these kinds of feelings for a long while. Therefore... I don’t know if I’m able to feel that you’re ‘important’. I can no longer distinguish whether this is the normal feeling that I had a thousand years ago.”

The girl who had died a long, loong time ago stared into nothingness and said: “I’ll tell you when I’ve come to a conclusion, Rinne. Thanks for your kind words.”

Tilting her head, Guriko still smiled clumsily.

For just a brief moment, an expression showed on Rinne’s face as if she wanted to cry, but she quickly got back to the original topic.

“Back to our previous topic... Hmm... where were we?”

“You said you jumped into the ocean.”

Guriko replied as she fought the boss on the screen at the same time.

Rinne nodded.

“Yes, I jumped into the ocean to seek death. As to why I chose the seaside, it was because it was close... also, it would trouble a lot of people if I committed suicide on the railway.”

“You thought of others even back then! That’s really like you... hohoho.”

Guriko gave a rare smile. Rinne’s eyes were looking at somewhere far away.

“Sensei saved me there.”

“Why would Sakaki be there?”

“Uh?”

Rinne’s eyes widened.

Then Rinne tilted her head as if thinking about something.

“– Hmm, huh, speaking of it, why indeed? No one swims in the sea during winter, so why would Sensei be there? Although I don’t know, I think Sensei must be there due to some sort of business. He saw me jump in and saved me.”

“Sakaki was probably there to kill himself too.”

“That’s impossible!”

Rinne burst out laughing due to Guriko’s words. It would be impossible, even if it was a joke.

“Anyways, Sensei saved me at the risk of his own life. I was hovering near death, and he resuscitated me – Ahh, Guriko, why are you getting me to say this?”

”Bam", Rinne suddenly knocked on Guriko’s head.

Shocked, Guriko looked at Rinne.

Rinne looked very embarrassed.

“… And then, Sensei told me off, saying that I shouldn’t kill myself. Then – ahaha, what do you think Sensei, drenched from head to toe, said to me? He said: ‘I fell in love with you at first sight. Please marry me.’ My brain froze, because I suddenly felt like Cinderella, with someone as handsome as Sensei suddenly… telling me…”

Rinne became red to the ears all of a sudden, while Guriko opened

her eyes wide in shock. She probably didn't know why Rinne was blushing. Perhaps even Rinne herself didn't know the reason!

"It was – at about this time last year, or a bit later. At the end, I found the hope to keep living because I met Sakaki-sensei, and so I gave up trying to kill myself and decided to study at Kannonsakazaki High School. I didn't know Sensei would chase after me as a teacher..."

"That guy's activity is pretty weird in itself."

"But I was really happy! I liked Sensei even back then. Even now, I still feel that meeting Sensei in the sea was like a dream..."

With a dreamy, euphoric expression, Rinne said softly with a hand on her chest.

It was truly miraculous. Perhaps it could be called destiny!

Meeting Sakaki Guryū, who changed Usagawa Rinne's life.

At the same time it was also the beginning of the terrible situation that Usagawa Rinne was now facing.

As she easily went past level by level, Guriko said to Rinne with an innocent voice: "... Rinne, could it be that you ate 'it' at that time?"

"Mm, I ate the Apple."

Rinne answered quietly. Of course, this wasn't an 'apple' that you'd buy from the shops.

That was the forbidden fruit that would give a human immortality, the Apple growing on the tree at entrance to the next world, where only certain selected people could reach. No one knows what conditions were used to choose the humans who can reach the tree. The only thing that was certain was that those who ate the Apple would never be able to die, and would forever be targeted by the Mushi as long as they live.

"I think Usagawa Rinne died in the sea. I was resurrected due to having eaten the Apple, and then receiving hope from Sakaki-sensei. All of these things gave me a true rebirth, and that is why I am still alive today."

"Mmm..."

Guriko listened to Rinne with a gentle expression.

Guriko had lived with her for almost a month already, Rinne thought. In this short time, this girl had become more human-like. She didn't appear to notice it herself, but she smiled more often, and her expressions were much softer.

Would I be able to more or less heal Guriko's heart like Sakaki did to mine? Rinne smiled inwardly. Rinne wanted to save Guriko for no particular reason. She perhaps projected her old self, an image of a girl who didn't have anything important in the world and wanted to die, onto Guriko! However, it could be said that it had nothing to do with her own past, and Rinne simply liked Guriko's personality. She knew that although Guriko was rude and found it hard to understand others' emotions, she wasn't a bad person. If that was the case, then it would be too pitiful to leave such a person to endure pain. Therefore, Rinne sincerely wanted to help her.

"... Sakaki... Guryū...?"

Guriko's hands didn't stop, and she said this while she kept playing the video game: "Is that guy really so charismatic?"

"Mmm. Very."

Rinne replied immediately. Guriko still said with a serious face: "I'd think so, since he's the person whom you like."

Such delightful words.

"I'm beginning to want to think about getting along with that guy too, and it seems you don't like me to argue with that guy, so I'll back down. But that guy still seems to act cautiously towards me even now – we probably can't be good friends!"

"Mm, that's good, Guriko."

Rinne was honestly glad. It would be great if Guriko and Sakaki can get along peacefully. That would just be amazing! Therefore, Rinne suggested with a smiling face: "Should the three of us go somewhere together sometime next week? It'd make us know each other better. I don't know if Sensei would have the time, but the end-of-semester exams finish next week, and I won't be working either."

"I don't mind... but it'd only make things boring if you bring me

along!”

“No it won’t!”

Rinne laughed, and Guriko also smiled as she turned her face around –

“Huh –”

Suddenly, Guriko’s face became full of loathing.

"... This...”

All of Guriko’s movements have ceased. She only stared at the ceiling of the room.

”What’s wrong, Guriko?” Rinne asked, surprised. On the screen, Kirby was already dead.

”... What is this? what is this scent? Not – a beast. What is this?”

”Guriko...”

”Could it be Mushi? No – it’s such a strong power. Rinne!”

The sharp yell startled Rinne.

With a serious face, Guriko said: "I’ll go and check out the situation outside. You stay in this room, and don’t open the door no matter who comes. Turn off the lights and try not to make a sound until I come back.”

”Guriko...”

”Wait until I’m back. I’ve got a bad feeling –”

Guriko kicked open the door and sprang into the night.

No matter what kind of a well-to-do family he was born into, how favored he was by the goddess of fortune, or how beautiful his features were, Sakaki's heart was still unable to feel satisfied. Even though he showed his talent in all sorts of fields and was praised by the entire society, he was still eaten away by a feeling of emptiness. Sakaki thought that he would never be happy, since he can't obtain satisfaction no matter how much glory he gathered.

Happiness is a Mobius' Ring. He can't find the end no matter how close he examined it. It is truly foolish to become encumbered by the pursuit of happiness and waste one's life on it. If one didn't already have a fixed idea of what would constitute as happiness, then displeasure would undoubtedly follow no matter how accomplished one becomes. In that case, then what is the point of setting a noble and lofty goal? Happiness can be found everywhere if only one could stop and appreciate it. Sakaki's days of youth were wasted under a misconception.

It was a complete coincidence for him to meet Usagawa Rinne. He just wanted to see the ocean very much. Sakaki's work was very busy back then. He was being pressured to publish more high-class research papers, and to create more novel art pieces. He was already beginning to loathe such a life where he was squeezed dry. Therefore, had he not found Rinne that day, he may well have jumped into the sea himself. Sakaki believed he was already pushed to the edge back then.

Rinne jumped into the icy-cold sea without hesitation right in front of Sakaki's eyes at the winter seaside one year ago. No one was around apart from Sakaki. Even if Sakaki didn't exist, someone else would publish that research one day, right? Even if Sakaki didn't exist, someone else would participate in the Olympics anyways, right? Even without Sakaki, art would still progress, right? However, without Sakaki, there was absolutely no one else who would be able to save Rinne. For the first time since Sakaki was born, he found something meaningful that only he could accomplish. That was the thing he found.

Sakaki jumped into the sea after Rinne without hesitation. If the rescuer wasn't Sakaki, then he would have sunk into the sea too,

frozen by the cold. However, with a perfect posture, Sakaki enthusiastically saved Rinne and immediately dragged her back to the shore, waking her from unconsciousness.

He was simply, purely moved. Sakaki understood the meaning of happiness at that time, .

The answer was Usagawa Rinne.

And we all know what happened afterwards.

Sakaki decided to live for Usagawa Rinne, because she was the only 'happiness' for him. No matter what others said, that was the happiness he found by himself.

It was a year ago when Sakaki Guryū obtained the hope of his life from Rinne.

“Argh...”

Sakaki Guryū slowly woke up from the dream that vividly reanimated his past memories in the night shift room of the Kannonsakazaki Private High School. With a low moan, he lifted up his head and took in his surroundings. Sakaki was sitting in front of a table that was empty apart from a coffee pot under the bright – but rather fake – lighting. Looked like he accidentally fell asleep. He had been worrying over Rinne recently and was feeling rather down due to his lack of sleep. It was little wonder that he fell asleep here.

Sakaki rubbed his sleepy eyes with his fingers, smoothed his messy fringe, and got up to wash his face. Although the night shift room was small, basic furniture such as a bed and a washing stand were still present. Having washed his face and scattered away his fatigue, Sakaki wiped his face with a towel and stretched luxuriously.

“... Mmm.”

Just how long did he sleep for? He couldn’t even figure out clearly when he fell asleep. It was Sakaki’s turn to take the night shift tonight – one teacher was always needed to stay behind at the school, patrol the buildings, turn off the lights, and lock all the doors – that was why he was still at the school at such a late hour. Although he felt the students of Kannonsakazaki were all very obedient and unlikely to break into the school at night, those who do sneak in weren’t going to be just students. That was why Sakaki took this duty and considered it as a part of the job.

Looking at his watch, he noted it was already nine o'clock. Having skipped dinner, he was now very hungry. He will probably buy some food from some convenient store and then patrol the school grounds. After having decided that, Sakaki grabbed some change lying casually around and walked out of the night shift room. The soft moonlight outside the window was scattered on the quiet corridor.

Suddenly, Sakaki pricked his ears and listened carefully.

"Huh?"

Sakaki felt a nervous presence, and a serious expression surfaced on his face. There were sounds of breathing; a rapid breathing like a beast's. He didn't know where it came from. *Was I thinking too much? But –*

Closing the door of the night shift room, Sakaki walked towards the direction of the suspicious sound. It may be that a madman had slipped in, or a stray dog – this town was, after all, a rural place, and such things do happen once in a while. If that was the case, then he would have to chase them away. That was his job as the person taking the night shift.

Sakaki, with his strong sense of duty, made up his mind and casually turned around a bend in the corridor.

"--- Rrrrrrrr."

"--- Rrrrraaaaarrrrr---"

He heard that.

That ominous scream and moan was truly unlike anything made by creatures of this world. The angry roar smacked its way here as if it was an impact wave that shook the air, and robbed away Sakaki's

ability to think in the blink of an eye. He froze immediately, standing dead still. ‘That thing’ then obviously thought Sakaki, standing still, was a wonderful target to attack.

Claws.

“Um – uh?”

Sakaki suddenly reacted, lowering his body to dodge that blow. Instead of Sakaki, the air was cleaved apart. Claws - those were claws of animals. These claws swept past the top of Sakaki’s head, and knocked into the wall unhindered and vigorously. The terrifying destructive power crushed the concrete wall into smithereens.

“Wha – “

– What?!

Sakaki couldn’t even figure out the appearance of the perpetrator, and could only rely on his instincts to dodge swiftly from the danger and move away. With all the strength in his legs, Sakaki jumped backwards and landed safely on the ground. However, cold sweat seeped out from his skin and his heartbeat increased rapidly. The air around him seethed with a thick smell of blood.

That scent should have been there beforehand, but he didn’t notice it. Now that he paid attention to it, he could tell it was a very heavy odor. It was blood, and a large amount of it too. Why would such a smell be in the school during such a quiet night? Sakaki kept on thinking, trying to comprehend the situation.

The words emerging from his brain were ‘Guriko’, and ‘Mushi’.

It has got to do with those guys, right? But Sakaki didn’t have the extra energy to keep thinking, because he knew he was in the middle of a dangerous, changing whirlpool.

“Raaaaaaaaar!”

That 'thing' screamed. It was a scream of a beast that had lost its reason a long time ago. Sakaki took out the pistol that he carried with him from his pocket. He had thought that both Guriko and Mushi were very quiet recently and there would be no need to use this, but he never would have thought such a terrifying monster existed in the school.

It was something that Sakaki had never seen before.

Its tall figure almost touched the ceiling. The reason that such a vast body wasn't moving slowly was due to its strange shape. Its midsection looked to be the torso. Like a spider, numerous long and thin legs stretched out from the torso, and one long protruding part was on top of the torso. A single giant, ferocious eyeball grew on that promontory. The monster's shape really wasn't pretty at all! It was hairless, had a wet and slimy body, and it stank a lot. This creature was evidently not a normal being of this earth. However, it didn't feel incongruous in the school at night.

The monster's angry, large eyeball was facing Sakaki. It had many legs, with a sharp claw on the end of each one. The monster seemed to want to use those claws to tear apart and devor Sakaki.

"... Damn, it hurts. What this is thing?"

Sakaki muttered: "Just how much do you want to destroy our daily life? Mushi, Guriko..."

So Sakaki decided to strike first. He fired with his pistol, shooting three times in succession. Gunshots rang through the silence. A monster had appeared in the school. Reality had collapsed.

The empty cartridges fell on the corridor floor with a small sound.

Suddenly.

" --- Roaaaaaaar!"

The monster's figure disappeared.

"Whoa –"

Sakaki widened his eyes and stopped firing. With the disappearance of the target, the bullets went embedded into the wall and the floor.

Then, the monster that had originally disappeared as if it had melted immediately reformed, as if it had just solidified.

"— Roaaaaaaar!"

As if nothing had happened, it roared loudly and galloped towards Sakaki.

Looking at the monster that loomed towards him, Sakaki even

forgot to aim with his gun and just stood there dazedly.

Claws. Two claws lashed out. Sakaki skidded on the floor and dodged the ferocious attack that intended to kill him. The monster seemed to be unskilled when it came to delicate movements. Furious, it smashed face-forward into the wall, and only stopped when it broke all the window panes. With a pale face, Sakaki brushed off the scattering fragments of glass around him.

“... Please, can you not do actions that defy the laws of physics... ”

It disappeared. The monster had disappeared. It dodged hisbullets, and charged straight towards Sakaki with a destructive power that was more than enough to flatten a human body. It was almost a ridiculous existence that lived to fight. In the end, Sakaki couldn’t even understand why he was attacked. A small voice in his head whispered that there might be no reasons whatsoever.

However –

He couldn’t give up. He couldn’t be killed.

As long as Usagawa Rinne was alive, Sakaki – wouldn’t allow himself to die.

“That’s trust and a promise. Seriously – I fell in love with a problematic girl. Mushi, Guriko, monsters - they keep appearing one after the other and try to deter the path of our love. However, no matter what the obstacles may be, nothing can stop me. Hey, monster, who do you think I am –”

Sakaki said to the slow-moving monster that was looking towards him: “– I am the most powerful daddy-long-legs in the world!”

Sakaki hurried to open fire, not even giving the monster the time to disappear, and sprinted off at the same time that he fired. In the split second that the monster was shot by the bullet and screamed with shock, Sakaki had already escaped from the corridor like a rabbit. How could he fight such a monster? This was a question of priorities. It wasn't like a video game. Defeating that monster wouldn't increase experience nor would it give him any loot. In that case, there was no reason to fight. It would be better to run away and get the police or the army to fight!

The pragmatist Sakaki Guryū was twenty years old this year - no longer an age to dream of fighting monsters to maintain world

peace. Although there was the possibility that others might be attacked while he ran away, the result would be the same since he wouldn't win even if he faced the beast in battle. Therefore, he had to get those who actually could defeat the monster more quickly. It should work with just one infantry division, right? No matter how strong he was, Sakaki was still human at the end. He wasn't Superman. He had no duty to fight the monster.

But the monster was not kind enough to let Sakaki go.

"– Raaaaaaaar!"

The monster arrived behind Sakaki, and only one of its feet disappeared. And in the next moment –

"– Whoosh."

"Uoah?"

The monster's feet pierced through space and 'grew' out of the darkness. Sakaki hurried to twist his body. Although he dodged the monster's frontal attack, he couldn't completely avoid it. His clothing and skin were both sliced up by the claw. It hurt. This feeling probably meant the wound went all the way to the bone. Sakaki moaned with pain and fell on the ground.

With a clank, his pistol dropped on the corridor floor.

"– Roaaaaar!"

The monster roared with a strange sound. A closer look showed that one of the monster's feet was sucked into the darkness in thin air. Although he didn't understand the mechanism, it appeared that the feet passed through space and grew out again in front of Sakaki. Though the feet immediately retreated, the monster's body loomed closer to Sakaki.

"Tch... that's cheating!"

As Sakaki complained, he endured the pain and reached out a hand to pick up the gun. However, the monster's foot appeared out of thin air and kicked away the gun. That foot also gave Sakaki's jaw a heavy blow. Sakaki's body flew and smacked into the wall. His spare cartridge dropped from his pocket, making a crisp clattering sound.

– It was all over!

“Uuu... ”

But he had to hold on until the end. Ever since the day when Rinne was killed by Guriko, Sakaki had decided he could only die after he had ensured Rinne’s safety. That was Sakaki’s reason to keep living. So how could he be killed here – under such unreasonable conditions?

Drawing on will alone, Sakaki stood up and stared down the monster.

“... Stop trying to push yourself. You’ll die!”

In the middle of his field of sight...

...a silvery, shining object pierced the monster. The monster, which didn’t even recoil from a gunshot, staggered with the force of this blow and wailed in rage as purple body fluids gushed forth. The cruel weapon that stabbed into the monster’s tough body and inflicted such pain was a spoon. A girl dressed in black stood there as if protecting Sakaki.

The wind blew in from the broken window and blew at her very unique wolf-like haircut. Dry leaves fell on the corridor, and the girl’s white fingertips held a brand new spoon.

“Rinne would be very sad if you died. That’s not what I want to see.”

Guriko!

This girl, with a name as cruel and savage as Gankyū Eguriko, turned her head and looked at Sakaki over her shoulder.

“So I’m going to save you. After all –”

The spoon reflected moonlight, letting out an alluring shine.

“– I bought a lot of spoons with Rinne’s money.”

“Buy them with your own money! Milady Usarin is very poor!”

Sakaki couldn’t help but start to scold. Guriko, surprised, narrowed her eyes.

“So noisy. You're almost dead. Just be good and stay there. A useless guy needs to behave like a useless guy and stay at a corner with some sense of self-preservation. That thing’s opponent is me.”

Frankly, he didn’t think that this person’s appearance would make him so reassured. Sakaki didn’t trust Guriko. He felt restless whenever he thought she may show her true colors one day and attack Rinne again. That was because Sakaki did not consider Guriko human, just like that monster twisting and roaring in pain.

But she didn’t kill Rinne, and recently she was smiling more too. Although she didn’t open her heart completely to Sakaki, she was already appearing to be more like a human. Moreover, she came to save him.

”Guriko…”

Sakaki muttered. He couldn’t endure the pain of the wound any longer and collapsed to one knee.

“I told you to stop trying to be tough. Listen to what others say! Students are supposed to disobey to the teacher, but when the teacher doesn’t listen to the students it’s a social problem. Your job is to stay alive, and just leave the business of battle to me!”

Then, Guriko launched spoons into the air with the speed of rapid-fire bullets. Spoons pierced the monster’s entire body, thudding into its flesh one after the other, as purple body fluids hemorrhaged from the wounds.

Guriko rapidly drew forth new spoons.

“... Mmm. Since it’s so big, long-range attacks would take too long.”

”Guriko... that thing... What is that thing?”

Sakaki felt that Guriko should know the truth concerning that monster.

“It’s a monster.”

“Even I can tell that.”

“Then why did you ask?!”

Looks like Guriko didn't want to explain one single bit.

Sakaki felt anger rising up in him. Guriko noticed that he was angry, and reluctantly explained.

"It's a dark monster that people wouldn't sense in their daily lives. That's the kind of creature it is. There are actually many dangers that humans don't know about. Although I haven't seen a monster like this – it was probably originally sealed in this school and woke up due to some sort of opportunity!"

"What opportunity?"

After thinking for a while, Guriko answered matter-of-factly: "It was probably Mushi, but it's just too unfortunate if it happens to be a coincidence. Abnormal existences like Mushi and me can easily find such monsters. Although I don't know the goal of Mushi, but awakening such a monster – after all, it's too dangerous to let it roam free. It should have the power to easily kill off a human."

"I felt that first-hand."

"Hmm. Your life is rather tough, Sakaki."

He felt that Guriko smiled. But since she wasn't facing Sakaki, Sakaki didn't know what her real expression was. The monster was already staring at her angrily with an eye that has changed its color.

"Guriko. That thing does strange tricks. Be careful!"

Before he knew it, Sakaki was already giving Guriko advice.

"Don't worry. You just stay low now."

Guriko wasn't listening at all.

Why won't she be cute!? But she was reliable.

Sakaki realized that he had reduced his caution towards her. *I'll also believe in this girl that Rinne believes in*, Sakaki Guryū thought at this instant. Guriko had undoubtedly saved Sakaki, and Usagawa Rinne also trusted both of them very much. The three of them, who started off as perpetrator and victims, had somehow already developed some kind of a bond.

… Little did they know that this was going according to the plot the ‘enemy’ had written.

In pajamas, Guriko rapidly dodged the attacks speeding towards her, and approached the monster by running in the corridor with spoons in one hand. The situation had been completely reversed. The monster was no longer the perpetrator but the victim. The giant and grotesque monster had been overwhelmed by the delicate girl.

With all her strength, Guriko lunged towards the protrusion on the violently resisting monster.

“You mad monster that's screaming nonsense, just watch me gouge out your eyeballs!”

“Pluck.”

“Pzzt, pzzt.”

With a strange sound, the spoon sank into the monster’s eye socket and eye liquid spurted out. The enormous lament the monster made at the moment of its death echoed in the nightly school. The expression on Guriko’s face didn’t change. The monster ended its duty as a pitiful sacrifice and returned to the darkness. Like the Mushi, the monster dissipated into air without leaving a bone behind as soon as it died.

All that was left in the corridor was purple body liquid. The monster was completely destroyed.

Pulling his hood low, the young fortune teller looked at this scene at a distance with a smile on his face. His red eyes sparkled with an ominous light. In his hand, he held the gun Sakaki dropped on the

ground and the spare cartridge. He had ordered the monster to transport those across space. As long as he obtained this weapon, his plan would reached its final stage. He only needed to endure this a little longer before he can stop pretending to be those disgusting Mushi.

"... Thank you, my dear Legion Bandanna. You really did act as I thought... had I been lucky, I was hoping that Sakaki Guryū would be almost dead by now. What a surprise. As a human, he counts as a very strong master athlete. What a pity that he got away."

Smiling, 'he' muttered to himself with 'his' original voice: "'Pleasures should be savored till the last moment'. Now **that** should count as God's command. God, hehehe, what a convenient existence. He even created a fate that suits me so well."

Outside of Guriko and Sakaki's sight, 'he' looked at the sky nonchalantly.

"Or was it that – such a person doesn't even exist?"

That wasn't an impossible thought.

Because if God truly exists, then an existence such as the fortune teller would definitely have long ago been punished!

"If He doesn't exist – then I offer you my condolences, Mushi."

With a brisk swish of his robes, 'he' leisurely left the nightly school.

"The Dream World Beast should have hatched by now..."

Then all that was left would be the finale.

"The day that my wish is fulfilled won't be far away, either..."

At the end – 'he' lifted his head to look at the pair of humans.

"Before then, you can just have as many happy and sweet dreams as possible –"

In the distant past, there was an existence that goaded the primeval humans into stealing the forbidden fruit.

The name of that creature, the most cunning and ugly among all creatures, was –

Final Night : Don’t Look

The curtains were lifted. Before we continue the story, let us cast our eyes toward the apartment where Usagawa Rinne lived, a place where no real estate agencies were interested in whatsoever. The scene here was quiet, as if it was a nurturing place for a dimension of phantoms. We shall move past the corridor with the faded walls, a corridor that was not burnt by fire but was showing a smoky black sheen.

The door with a plate indicating ‘1A’ had an unnecessary door bell.

Coming through the wooden door that required some skill to open, we move our sight to the two girls who were deeply asleep in the middle of the narrow, small room. One was the owner of this room, Usagawa Rinne. She had a head of neat short hair and skin white as snow. And for the one who tightly clutched Usagawa Rinne and battled intensely with nightmares... was Guriko. The girl named Gankyū Eguriko was moaning softly, drenched in cold sweat.

Nightmares were troubling her less after she started living with Rinne. Could it be possible that Guriko's heart, sick from a millennium of wandering, was healing little by little after being touched by Usagawa Rinne's gentleness? Her wolf-like messy hair, which wouldn't stay down no matter how much she brushed it, was scattered over the bed covers.

This seemed very interesting, and they looked as if they were the very materialization of happiness. However, the two girls who slept next to each other were yet to know that the existence given to destroy this happiness was placed right next to their pillows.

"Pzzt, pzzt, pzzt."

The Dream World Beast's egg quietly cracked.

It was an egg as large as a human skull, with bright and colorful geometrical patterns scattered all over the shell. It was different from the egg of any creatures on earth. This egg was of a creature similar to Legion Bandanna, which Guriko defeated at the school two nights ago. It was a forbidden creature that should not exist in the peaceful human world. It obtained nutrients from eating Usagawa Rinne and Guriko's 'dreams', and slowly built up its strength to hatch out of the shell.

Although Guriko told Rinne: "Things the Mushi gave you can be dangerous. Throw it away or break it!", Rinne was too kind to ever do such a thing. At the end, Guriko also agreed optimistically that this shouldn't be the egg of any particularly dangerous creature.

But Guriko was too naive. A Dream World Beast was indeed not a dangerous creature, but Guriko was the one providing the Dream World Beast with the nutrients – Guriko herself should count as a dangerous creature!

It was almost time. It was too late even for regrets. Everything was progressing towards the worst outcome possible for them. However, they did not know this, and only peacefully hungered after happy

dreams.

– Dream while you can, dream happy dreams.

Once they wake from the dream, the end will be before them.

Can you hear it, the sound of the shell cracking, the sound of the Dream World Beast wanting to come out?

“Knock knock, knock knock.”

She always remembered that the sky was especially clear on that day. The unpredictable dark clouds that had gathered in the past few days were all blown away. The sun hung high in a windless sky. It was the ideal weather for going out. As the temperature wasn’t very low, there was no need for gloves. As she walked, she soon took off her coat too. The weather was warm, and the plants also grew sparkling and green as if they were happy as well. People’s expressions were spirited and full of happiness.

Usagawa Rinne hung her coat, which she took off, on her arm, and repetitively inquired Guriko if her clothing was appropriate. This was the outfit that she contemplated on for two hours before buying. Rinne was confident that it was fine, but that could just be her stubbornness speaking. However, even if she were to ask Guriko, who knew nothing about clothing or fashion, all she would get would be some utterly useless advice such as “any clothing is appropriate as long as it covers your body!" To note, Guriko said this with wide and incredulous eyes.

By the way, since Guriko only had one set of outdoor clothes, she was still wearing the school’s sailor uniform. Guriko usually wore Rinne’s casual clothes inside the house, but that would become quite problematic if she went outdoors like that. Guriko had previously ran into town with just her black pajamas on. That really scared Rinne. It looked like Guriko may lack common sense regarding some specific issues, which was truly terrible!

“No matter what you wear –”

Guriko was incredulous when she told Rinne, who was being very

attentive to her outfit: “Sakaki wouldn’t mind!”

“That’s true, but…”

Watching Rinne, who was at a loss of what to do, Guriko sighed with exhaustion.

“Is this the heart of a maiden? I can’t understand it… anyways, no matter how worried you are, you don’t have time to change anymore. Therefore, it’s a waste of time to worry at all.”

“Uuuu –”

Guriko’s cold words made Rinne’s expression a little troubled. Guriko was speaking in her ordinary tone. She wasn’t angry, but Rinne still felt it could’ve been said in a slightly different way. Guriko was certainly clumsy and with a rude attitude.

The end-of-term exams have finished. Under Sakaki’s passionate teaching, the students in class 1-B all achieved high marks (except for one certain student). They were all showing off their good grades to their parents while preparing to enjoy the winter break. Rinne, who could not boast her good grades to her parents, and that certain student (Guriko), who had no parents to reprimand her for her bad grades, also have two weeks of winter break starting today. Although Rinne was still rather restless, she couldn’t help but feel settled for now.

Today was the day the three of them were going out together. Rinne had planned a happy day tour in order for Guriko and Sakaki to get along better and deepen their friendship. Rinne planned for the three of them to have fun till sunset to get rid of the apprehension Sakaki still had towards and Guriko, and also to change Guriko’s stubborn and deep-grained perceptions of Sakaki.

Rinne’s philosophy was that everyone should get along well together, that everyone should be happy.

But let us leave that aside for now.

“Sensei –”

Rinne greeted Sakaki, who had the attention of all the customers. She walked into the cafe in front of the station and sat down opposite Sakaki together with a stiff-faced Guriko. The heater was on inside and it felt very hot. Sakaki had also dressed up for today,

and his glamour was worthy of a movie star. It was evident that he put a lot of thoughts in it. However, the more stylish Sakaki appeared, the more it emphasized Rinne's poverty. This made Rinne more troubled.

But no matter what, Sakaki dressed up for her – that made Rinne feel rather awkward, but at the same time very happy. Trust and promises; Rinne stopped wondering if she was good enough for Sakaki. Since Sakaki definitely loved her, then she shouldn't be holding back, and would need to repay him with all of her love.

Rinne thought thus.

"Hmm, milady is very punctual!"

"Have you been waiting long?"

"No, I just got here."

But then the amount of people swarming around the cafe had swelled up far too quickly!

In such times, an ordinary person would surely had shrank back, giving too much thought to the fact that everyone else was staring. However, Rinne and Sakaki were already used to it, and faced the attention with a nonchalant composure. Sakaki has a very noteworthy appearance. It would be too stressful to pay much attention to such things.

Rinne's efforts in picking her clothes paid off. Sakaki said: "Milady, your outfit today is even cuter than normal! I thought you were a pixie."

That compliment was too much for her. Rinne blushed red with embarrassment.

"Sensei is very handsome too!"

"Thank you... you, on the other hand, are exactly the same as always."

Sakaki moved his eyes towards Guriko. Guriko jumped.

"Rubbish! Why should I dress up for you!"

"Gu, Guriko-chan, don't be so harsh as soon as you start to speak... Sensei, you too. Today's meant to be a happy day, isn't it? Don't say

things that are too provocative…”

Poor Usagawa Rinne. The other two had sparks flying between them, while she only looked on with a helpless expression.

Being unable to sway Rinne, the other two could only compromise reluctantly for her sake.

“…This is at Rinne’s request. I want to get on well with you the best possible, but my personality is just how it is, and you’re not too malleable either. So for now –”

Guriko continued with an pure voice: “– let’s maintain the current situation for now. I’ll do my best to control my temper.”

“Then I’ll do the same. I’ll do my best to try trusting you.”

Listening to their incredible conversation, Rinne couldn’t help but feel funny and laughed out loud.

“You two are so similar! I really think you’d become good friends…”

It’d be great if they can become good friends. Rinne thought this calmly and quietly in her heart.

Rinne’s wish immediately came true. They got together unexpectedly cordially once they removed their pride and apprehension. Even though it was awkward at first, they gradually understood each other. Guriko could understand Sakaki’s gentleness beneath his arrogance, and Sakaki also discovered Guriko’s goodness that was distorted by her clumsiness. It went without saying that it was Rinne who had painstakingly resolved the misunderstandings and misgivings between them.

Sakaki appeared to really sympathize with Guriko’s past when she spoke of it. He could also understand that Guriko’s incomprehensible odd behaviors were due to compelling reasons, just as Rinne had said. Sakaki apologized for his previous rudeness, and Guriko also forgave him. The wall looming between the two suddenly collapsed as if their earlier arguments were mere pretenses.

This miracle continued for five hours.

Bam! Bam! These brisk and intermittent sounds could be heard all around them. They were at a more boisterous town a bit further from Kannonsakazaki. This was the gaming zone next to the cinema, and Sakaki and Guriko were taking on a co-op shooting game. They each controlled a gun connected to the machine, and fired non-stop while aiming at the violent dragon going berserk in the screen.

This kind of shooting games, in which one can experience an authentic gun battle, was fairly in the current age. Sakaki and Guriko – who held a gun each – and Rinne, who was sitting in the middle screaming, all sat in the seats modeled after car seats. Their booth was separated from the outside through a curtain, and they were engrossed in the sound and light of the game.

An incredible unity had already arisen between the three, and they were treating each other in an honest and unreserved attitude. Although the conversation between Guriko and Sakaki were still sharp and Rinne couldn't tell whether they were joking or fighting, that seemed to be their way of communication and Rinne no longer tried to prevent their arguments.

People have different ways of dealing with others. Compared to some honeyed words that don't always seem to be true, Rinne felt that the straightforward and brutally honest way Guriko and Sakaki talked to each other was actually a good kind of relationship. People can become good friends even without deliberately trying to flatter each other.

Usagawa Rinne became a little less worried when she thought of such things.

Even if there was absolutely no hope in the future, we probably won't lose to our enemies.

We won't lose to fate, or to Mushi.

"Guriko! Your bullets haven't been hitting the enemy at all! Aim properly, then shoot! That's me over there! Don't hit your fellow comrade, you traitor! Why are you only accurate when shooting at me? Just more or less aim properly!"

"Shut up! I've never played such a crazy game. All those eyeballs flying towards me is a mess on the screen. I'm gonna throw up soon."

"Guriko-chan's only played console games with a TV..."

Rinne stopped their scolding in a roundabout way, and smiled gently.

The game they were playing had some strange premises. Moments after dinosaurs appeared, UFOs started attacking from outer space. While they annihilated aliens, they got involved in a bank robbery too. There was no sense of continuation in the plot. Because there was no way of knowing what would happen next, it was pretty fun to watch them play. The scene suddenly entered in the microbial world, and the two were now fighting white blood cells.

Sakaki was very good with a gun (which was totally expected, since he normally practiced shooting with real bullets). As long as he didn't get shot by Guriko, he wouldn't die easily. Guriko, on the other hand, kept wasting coins and dying pathetically. Sakaki prepared a mountain of 100 yen coins, and there wasn't much left by now. Still, thanks to that investment, the two seemed to have reached the end battle. The final boss controlling the robots began some senseless explanations. What a stupid game. Or was it a game that would make the players stupid? The game developer probably wanted to make a stupid game to start with. The plot of the game was very far removed from 'a masterpiece that is both sensible and moving', as advertised!

The robot controlled by the final boss fired out scallops from rocket launchers. Sakaki accurately shot through the scallops, while Guriko took the chance and attacked the main body of the robot. However, for some reason, Guriko's bullets disappeared without even grazing the giant robot.

"Guriko, did you aim before you shoot?"

"The more I aim, the more it goes off... is this machine working

properly?”

“Don’t blame the machine. Wow, you got me again! Why don’t you aim at the giant robot? You’re aiming at me, who’s as small as a speck of rice – and how come you can actually get me?”

“How would I know. Ask my finger...”

Rinne looked at the two, who were conversing well together with a face full of satisfaction, and thought that it was great Guriko and Sakaki can get on well with each other. *I hate to have two people I like fighting with each other. At least such a situation won’t happen now – although there were still a mountain of questions and there was no sign of a bright future, just being like this can give me a sense of being saved.*

At this time, Usagawa Rinne had yet to despair about the future.

No matter how painful and how condemned the future that awaited her may prove to be, Rinne should still be able to get through the difficulties using her optimistic personality and live on happily ever after! It was because she had the strength to keep on living, and Guriko had also said that she will protect her.

And she will stay with Sakaki Guryū forever, or at least till his life ends.

Maybe Usagawa Rinne can stay beside him all the way till the end, and smile with him.

However –

“Crack, splish, crack crack crack.”

“Splat... uuuuu.”

Suddenly -

- The robot that continuously released scallops disappeared. No, it was more like the screen suddenly darkened, and all the pictures disappeared. Even the stereo that was going loud as a storm became silent. The lighting disappeared in the shop. When they drew aside the curtain and looked out, the entire shop was in a blackout.

“What’s wrong?”

Guriko was incredulous, and still held the toy gun in her hands.

“A blackout?”

“How rare. Is the power plant down?”

Rinne’s words were very practical. That should be the reason based on mundane and ordinary logic. Otherwise, perhaps a wire snapped, or that someone took off the shop’s fuse as a prank.

“Buzz... zzzz...”

It was a sound like the spluttering of flames or the chirping of insects.

“Sakaki... Rinne. Hey.”

Guriko called out to them with a panicking tone. The two of them, who were looking towards the outside, turned to Guriko.

“What’s up?”

“Something’s going on with the screen.”

Guriko said in an even voice. Following Guriko’s words, Sakaki and Rinne looked at the completely black screen.

There.

“Buzz... zzzzz... zzz...”

An alien scene was getting bigger and bigger on the screen, which had lost its power and shouldn’t be able to display any images. “Shhhhha”, the entire screen showed grey things that were writhing as if they were crawling. Worms?

No.

These were –

“Eyeballs.”

Guriko said succinctly.

Yes, they were countless eyeballs, and they were very lifelike. White eyeballs that didn’t seem to belong to anyone were dripping with slick eye liquid. Veins undulated on them, and they twirled like crawling worms.

“Urk...”

Rinne moved her eyes away out of disgust, and Sakaki’s face was also pale as a sheet. Guriko stared straight toward the odd picture. Soon after, the eyeballs focused into one image.

“Buzz... zzzz... zzz...”

It was the image of a girl.

No, it was something that resembled a girl.

Her body was made of insect parts. She had giant red composite eyes, antennae unique to insects, and a sharp mandible and claws came out of the her shiny black carapace. It was an insect. An insect.

The insect was dressed in a cute, flowing dress, and wore peach colored shoes. Upon closer inspection, the antennae even had a large bow tied to them. That was a very strange and completely incongruous outfit.

That existence which resembled both a girl and an insect was hugging a bear toy in front of its chest – a teddy bear. The bear had a simple appearance, and the round black eyes were sawed-on buttons.

“This –”

With a low voice, Rinne couldn’t help but speak out.

“This teddy bear –”

An incredulous expression surfaced on Rinne's face.

It's the teddy bear that I used to want a lot.

Guriko quickly turned to Rinne.

"You're saying that's – the one you told me before, the one that your dad won't buy for you no matter how much you begged?"

"Yes. Ahhh. Why? What's going on? What's going on –"

Rinne was confused. Guriko couldn't understand this situation either.

Countless eyeballs were squashed in next to the insect, and they were so real it was like they truly existed there. Their color and shape were completely unlike images that you would expected from a game. The girl-like and insect-like existence, surrounded by eyeballs, said in a low voice as it moved its antennae:

"... Mushi, eyeballs, a teddy bear... "

It was as if the air around them suddenly frozen over in the blink of an eye.

Everyone was speechless. They couldn't even move their fingertips, and were completely drawn in by the alien scene before them.

The disgusting monster continued with a cute and girly voice: "... that's right, they are the things that you fear and desire. Things that exist in the core of your lives. I was born from 'there', born from consuming 'that'."

This downright chilling, uncomfortably spooky thing kept talking: "... Glad to meet you, Mother, I'm the Dream World Beast. Thank you for providing me with nutrition and giving birth to me in this world. You let me obtain such a strong power."

“Dream World... Beast.”

Sakaki said softly: “You’re that egg’s...”

The Dream World Beast ignored Sakaki’s presence, and kept staring at Rinne and Guriko.

“... A Dream World Beast grows by consuming the ‘dreams’ of humans. The living essence of humans are mixed in ‘dreams’, so it’s very nutritious. For monsters like us, who can’t be counted as living creatures, eating the ‘dreams’ of you, who have Apples, provide us with a very great power.”

“She” continued talking with that chilling voice: “... I’m your ‘desire’. I’m your ‘fear’. I’m the most primeval thing in your lives. You are the ones who made me into this shape. Mushi, eyeballs, a teddy bear –”

This thing’s appearance was actually something like that.

“...This is your essence. Although this form is a combination of the ‘dreams’ of both of you, I am very happy. I have obtained such a strong body!”

“You’re saying that this is the essence of – Rinne and I?”

This terrifying monster.

“... Yes. My shape is your ‘desire’, and also your ‘fear’.”

The Dream World Beast stretched her hand, and pointed towards Guriko.

“... You’re scared of Mushi, scared of that absolutely invincible enemy. No matter how much you fight them, how many you manage to kill, Mushi would never die out and would always spawn out more. That existence that killed your family –”

“Chirp”, the Dream World Beast made a sound like the cry of birds.

“... At the same time, you desire Mushi. Killing Mushi is the meaning of your existence. If all the Mushi were to disappear, then you’d lose the meaning of your life. Therefore you’re afraid, and at the same time desire, those Mushi.”

Guriko didn’t answer. She only pursed her lips tightly and stared at the Dream World Beast.

The Dream World Beast then looked at Rinne.

"... You are the same."

Rinne was startled.

"... You are also afraid of the teddy bear that changed your life. A teddy bear is just an allusion here. It represents your 'desire'. You lived for 15 years without getting what you wanted. You always longed for the subject of your desire, but at the same time you're afraid that such a thing would never appear."

The Dream World Beast looked at Sakaki.

"... Even if the object of your desire had already appeared, you still often feel afraid, afraid that the feelings you derive from the object – be it love or a place to belong in society – would one day disappear. You are afraid from the bottom of your heart about the possibility of being separated from Sakaki Guryū. The contradiction created from your heartfelt longing for Sakaki Guryū is embodied in this teddy bear..."

Rinne fell onto a chair and shivered. She would of course have such a reaction when her innermost thoughts were suddenly pointed out. The Dream World Beast continued without a pause.

It looked straight toward Gankyū Eguriko.

"... You love and hate eyeballs at the same time."

Guriko didn't make a sound.

"Your own eyeballs have long become murky and lost their shine in your endless life. Therefore you want to gouge out others' pretty eyeballs. You long for beautiful eyes, you want to possess them, and you are afraid to be looked at by beautiful eyes. It was a fearful contradiction created from jealousy – you became less and less like a human due to this hobby. Gankyū Eguriko, Eyeball Gouger; what an allusion of a name –"

"You've been –"

Guriko's barrel-like eyes stared straight toward the space before her, and spoke to the Dream World Beast with a pure voice.

"– chatting away annoyingly for quite some time. Thanks for this

tiresome mental test. So, what do you want to use that thing for? The monster we gave birth to? Mushi?!”

“… My my…”

The voice –

“You discovered me. What a sharp sixth sense!”

– changed.

The voice was like the falsetto of a man or the contralto of a female. It was a chilly and enthralling sound.

Guriko glared at the screen.

“A newborn baby can’t possibly know this much about us. It doesn't matter if it was a human, animal, or a monster. A baby is still a baby. Even if it grew by eating our ‘dreams’, can a newborn baby explain these ‘dreams’? These emotions are only known by you, who’ve been observing us!”

“... How perceptive!”

The voice said delightfully: “This Dream World Beast is indeed still a baby! It can’t tell right from wrong, and it only has an immature intelligence, which I can easily manipulate. However, I need to correct one thing! It’s not ‘us’ who want to use this monster for evil deeds... ”

“Puft,” the gaming console made a noise.

"... But me as an **individual**. Do you know what that means?"

"Crack".

"Crack, smack, craaaaack, crunch crack."

There was the sound of something crumbling. It sounded as if the earth was cracking apart. It was an ear-splitting sound.

It could be heard in the entire gaming zone complex.

"Boom –"

As if this entire building was being crushed by some weight –

"You bastard!"

Guriko gave a short yell, then sprinted through the crowd after grabbing Sakaki and Rinne's hands. Guriko rushed out and ran with an unbelievable speed while dragging the other two. At the same moment that they escaped the gaming zone, the entire building crumbled down in the blink of an eye as if it was perfectly timed.

Guriko deflected the debris with her two hands, and saw the giant monster with its back to the sun.

It had a giant body and smashed the building with only one foot. It had dark crimson complex eyes and a sharp jaw. It was just like the creature they saw on the screen in the gaming console. It wasn't wearing a flowing dress, though, nor were there eyeballs wriggling beside it, but that was definitely the Dream World Beast that appeared in the picture.

Watching the enormous giant monster, Guriko couldn't help but swear out loud.

"You monster!"

That was the true form of the Dream World Beast, which hatched due to having eaten the two girls' dreams.

I was really too careless. Gankyū Eguriko thought as she lifted up her head to look at the Dream World Beast currently destroying the town. How could she not have sensed such a – such a gigantic and powerful monster? Could it be that she was too engrossed in the video game? No, that was not it – she didn't feel any dangerous aura. The Dream World Beast should have triggered her vigilance, but she felt nothing even as she looked at the creature with her two eyes. How could she have no feelings of alarm toward a monster with such a terrifying fighting ability, and could flatten shops with ease and dig up a building with just one hand?!

But she understood it. *It was because this monster was born from eating the 'dreams' Rinne and I had. That way, the Dream World Beast should only have the scents of Rinne and myself!* Guriko certainly wouldn't consider Rinne and herself as targets, therefore she couldn't feel alarmed at this creature.

But that wasn't the important part.

"Sakaki."

As Guriko ran further away from the Dream World Beast together with Sakaki and Rinne, she said.

Sakaki, who was walking at the front, turned his head to answer Guriko.

"What?"

"You take care of Rinne for me."

Guriko had made the decision in her heart a long time ago. She had desired to have a place to die for a thousand years. However, since she had nowhere important for her anywhere, it didn't matter whether she lived or died. However, she had already taken back her humanity, and could now make a decision to fight for someone else.

Rinne noticed Guriko's thoughts, and her face paled.

“Guriko… chan, could it be that you…”

Guriko smiled gently.

“Rinne, you must keep live. You’re worth it.”

“Guriko-chan…”

Rinne looked as if she was about to cry.

“Don’t worry, I won’t die! That’s how I’m constructed!”

Guriko turned around in the blink of an eye, moved her eyes away from the two of them, pulled out three spoons that she hid in the pockets of her uniform, and threw them. The spoons sparkled beautifully under the sunlight with a silvery sheen. Guriko swiftly dodged from the people fleeing the scene. She ran up to the rooftop of a shop and stood like an invincible warrior. She cast one look at the other two, who were walking away, just as Rinne was looking at her. Guriko murmured in a small voice: “Sorry…”

Looking up at the Dream World Beast, Guriko realized her body was shaking.

“… Even with an immortal body, it would have to take a few years for me to resuscitate once the body is completely destroyed – I won’t be able to see you for a while. How lonely.”

Guriko suddenly clamped her mouth shut with her hand.

“Would I feel… lonely?”

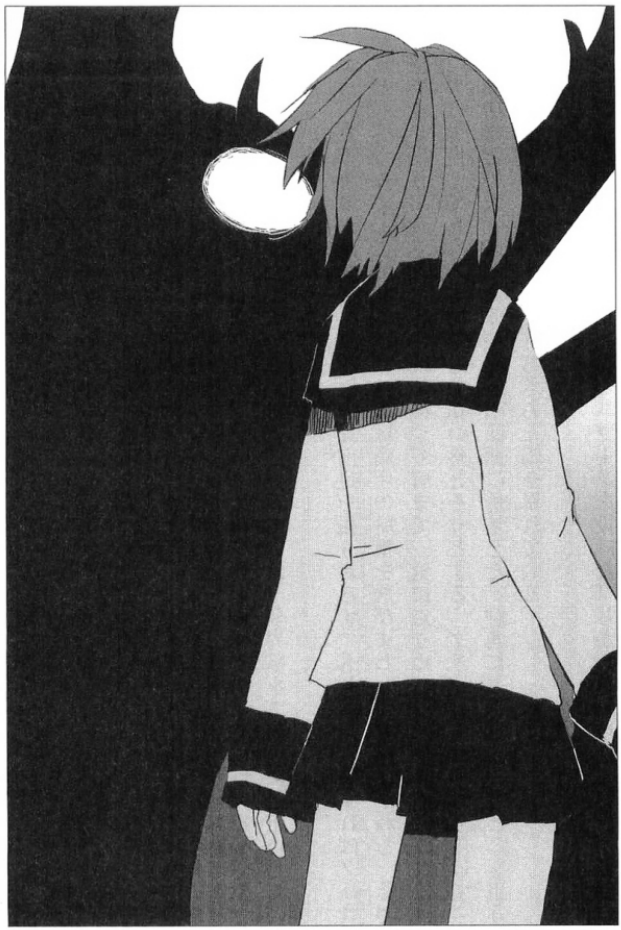
The Dream World Beast found Guriko, and emitted insect-like cries.

“Chirp – chirp –” ‘It’ stared straight at Guriko without blinking.

“The Dream World Beast was probably instructed by the Mushi to attack the three of us. If I don’t stop it, those his next target will be those two.

“How human am I! Thank you… Rinne, Sakaki.”

Her words ended. The rest of it did not need words.



Guriko approached the giant Dream World Beast without fear, and stared at it straight on. “Dream World Beasts should be harmless creatures with no power of destruction, right? Could it be that Rinne and I changed its nature? The two of us have already twisted cause and effect, triggered miracles, and ate the Apple of Eden. We could have actually managed to change the anatomical makeup of the Dream World Beast so much. I have to take responsibility and finish this instead of Rinne, who is far too gentle.

“Mom... Mom.”

The Dream World Beast’s answering cries sounded like it was calling for its mother. Although it may be a delusion... no, it

shouldn't be! Controlled by Mushi and having to fight its mother, this pitiful baby only had its voice left to express its true nature. Therefore, its mouth kept crying: "Mom... Mom. Mom... Mom."

"Sorry."

Guriko clutched her fists and said: "Mom – has to kill you."

The slaughter began. As the crowd left quickly, there were no humans around them anymore. Bricks and dust fell like rain. Guriko stood there majestically, and faced the giant Dream World Beast that blocked the sun. Guriko must be the only one who could keep the Dream World Beast at bay here.

"Wham", the Dream World Beast unhesitatingly put down its enormous front feet. If it stood on her directly, even Guriko would be flattened. Guriko jumped to the shop rooftops and dodged the attack impressively. Then she jumped directly on the Dream World Beast's dangling arm and ran up to its shoulder in one dash. As if frightened, the Dream World Beast eagerly tried to use its other front limb to swat her off. However, Guriko dodged that strike as well, and landed on the face of the Dream World Beast, which is about as the size of a small shop. She dangled beneath the antennae and wondered where she should strike. Panicking, the Dream World Beasts emitted chirping cries and twitched anxiously.

– *Take this!*

Guriko mercilessly threw out the spoons in her hand, but those spoons bounced off the Dream World Beast's tough carapace and fell on the ground. Guriko clicked her tongue in amazement, and swung towards the Dream World Beast's complex eyes while still clutching to the spoons left in her hand. Those was her only weapons. Therefore, if her next attack still had no effect, she would have no advantage whatsoever. As she accelerated, Guriko forcibly stabbed the spoon into the complex eye.

It was a violent stab. The stab didn't go in as deep as she imagined. Insect eyes were made of tougher material and were different from those of mammals. Although Guriko had a lot of raw force, she only managed to pierce it after a lot of effort.

The Dream World Beast was immediately enraged when its body was wounded by that stab.

"Roooooooaaaaaar –"

The Dream World Beast ignored its own injuries and swung at Guriko violently. Although Guriko shifted away in the blink of an eye, she was still too close and received a direct hit. Her body flew away as she felt the impact. Guriko coughed up blood as soon as she hit the ground.

“Urgh...”

She felt like her entire body was broken. This destructive power was simply incomparable. However, Guriko still managed to wipe off the blood on her body, and feebly stood up while leaning against a wall. Guriko still did not give up even when covered in blood.

“Don’t you dare that think that such things... are enough to kill me!”

An unyielding spirit burned in Guriko’s eyes as she yelled towards the Dream World Beast: “Come on! I’m still alive!”

But Guriko did not know.

She did not know that the worst possible development was going on, regardless of whether she managed to defeat the Dream World Beast or not. Guriko did not realize that, and that lack of realization was her mistake and her misfortune.

The final countdown had begun. Everything was simply a preparation for this march toward the helpless end. Rinne meeting Guriko, Guriko kissing Sakaki, the rampage of Legion Bandanna, the hatching of the Dream World Beast - it was all a script prepared by the very worst existence for its unknown purpose. Only the one who created the script could obtain happiness in this story. The only happy one would be that ugly creature who controlled the Mushi, controlled the Dream World Beast, and wanted to obtain the Apples.

“Do you – believe in God?”

A casual young man suddenly appeared casually. The crowds huddled in fear around them somehow all disappeared. An incredible silence surrounded them. The young man’s terrifying voice, sounding both like a male falsetto and a female contralto, seemed extraordinarily loud. Dressed in a purple robe and holding a large crystal orb in his hand, the young man had removed his cape, and his eyes sparkled with a faint reddish light.

Sakaki Guryū and Usagawa Rinne suddenly froze. Sakaki had long determined this young man to be an enemy, and his vigilance was understandable. After all, Rinne had once been strangled by this youth and his companions - she was almost killed. However, the young man seemed to knew very well that Sakaki’s vigilance was useless and continued to speak calmly: “It doesn’t really matter in the current situation whether you believe it or not. There was indeed an existence called God! I don’t know about right now, but the absolute existence called God did indeed exist in the past. However, even if it was God, a living creature is still a living creature. It could be wounded, could become sick, and of course had a limit to its lifespan. The inability to evade death is the destiny of all things alive, even for God. God was terrified of the death He would one day face, and attempted to escape that fate.”

The Mushi walked quietly towards the two. Sakaki got Rinne to hide behind his back.

“Therefore, using all of His knowledge and omnipotence, God created the forbidden fruit. Using almost half of His own soul, God made the Apple Tree grow in the Garden of Eden. The Tree soon budded and grew, and formed those red fruits. The soul of God, which swelled in size and power due to having absorbed Earth’s nutrition, was contained in those fruits. The fruits multiplied the pieces of God's soul from one to a hundred, and from the hundreds to the tens of thousands. God wanted to increase the size His soul this way. Suppose that God’s life span was a thousand years, then the half of the soul used to create the Apple Tree would have five hundred years of life in it. But the Apples could multiply. After a hundred years, the Apples would probably multiply to a thousand

times of its original amount. Therefore, if He ate the fruit harvested from there, then God's life span would also multiply by the thousands. If this went on, then God would undoubtedly obtain endless life."

"However – " The fortune teller stopped in his tracks, and laughed at Sakaki.

"It was all going well when the Apple Tree first started to bear fruit. Then Something happened. The two humans sent to protect the Apple Tree – Adam and Eve – ate the first Apple, and with it consumed five hundred years of God's life. Of course, I was only giving an example when I said God's lifespan might a thousand years. No one knows what it truly was. It may be ten thousand or a hundred thousand years. Although no one knows how many years it was, Adam and Eve nonetheless ate half of it. In His rage, God wanted to chop them to pieces. However, thanks to some other existence, the two actually managed to escape from God."

"Pfft", the young man questioned with a laugh: "What do you think that existence was?"

This man – he wasn't a Mushi. Mushi didn't have such expressions. Mushi didn't have such a cunning and hideous smile. Sakaki stared right at him and screamed.

"You bastard –"

"That existence is called 'Snake'."

A smile emerged on the young fortune teller's face like a snake devouring its prey as he quietly pronounced his name.

"The Snake longed for immortality. No, no, all creatures possess the wish to be immortal! But the Snake's desire exceeded that of all others. It didn't want to die. It wanted to live on. It didn't wanted to age. The Apples of Eden was therefore something the Snake wanted very much. That was why the Snake manipulated the two humans who guarded the Apples of Eden. It told them to go steal the Apple with complete seriousness."

The fortune-teller laughed.

“Adam and Eve were completely fooled and decided to steal the Apple. Of course, that was meant to be handed to the Snake. The Snake couldn’t bear to have any other immortal creatures apart from itself, so it burnt down the Apple Tree. The Snake thought that the Apple should have about 500 or 5000 years of life in it. Therefore, the Snake believed it should be able to do what God did after eating this Apple. The Snake should be able to plant new Apple trees, and make itself truly immortal!”

“However –“

"Something outside of the Snake’s plan happened. While the Snake was burning the Apple Tree, Adam and Eve each ate half an Apple. The Snake could do nothing. It decided to let Adam and Eve escape from the Garden of Eden for now, and resolved to think of a way to take their Apple away later. The Snake also left the Garden of Eden afterwards, but it didn’t give up on immortality! Nonetheless, the Snake’s life was very short compared to the two humans, who almost lived forever. The Snake died after expressing its immense regret to its children. Of course, its children inherited its will... even now, the descendants of the first Snake are still seeking the Apples of Eden.”

As if he was talking about himself, the fortune-teller went on placidly.

Could it be – Sakaki thought.

Could this guy be –

“Let’s leave the business of the Snake alone for a while. Adam and Eve, who ate the Apple, wanted to leave the Apple to their descendants too. Therefore, the two of them recreated the Garden of Eden in the crossroad between life and death, a realm where only humans can reach. They buried the Apple there, nursed an Apple Tree, and that place still contains an Apple Tree even till today. Usagawa Rinne –”

The fortune-teller stared at Rinne. Rinne jumped.

“– It was that Apple Tree you saw when you were close to death.”

“Ahhhh –”

Rinne wailed and instantly broke down. She couldn't imagine it was a tree with such a profound background. It was too scary, and this incredible and ancient burden almost snapped Rinne in half. She had eaten the Forbidden Fruit that the Snake, Adam, Eve, and even God Himself had pursued with a crazed fervour.

So that was the reason. It was truly too great a crime.

"The possibility of any human discovering the Apple Tree is very low, and it seems that humans who are capable of eating that Apple are even fewer. The Apples of Eden grow very slowly and don't bear fruit very often. Also, Apples tend to hang at rather high places. Not many people are willing to climb up the tree to pluck an Apple."

"It's because I was thirsty."

Staring into empty space, Rinne murmured to herself in a rather hoarse voice: "That was why I wanted that apple very much."

"In other words, you 'really wanted to keep living'. You had a depressing life where nothing happy ever happened to you, and so you wanted to live more happily. That wish was then expressed in the form of 'thirst'! Since the Garden of Eden is located in the world of the soul, the workings of the mind will change into the workings of the body and be expressed physically. So that is how it works... This always makes me excited."

But the fortune-teller continued as if he was impatient: "But even though we knew so much, we can't even approach the Garden of Eden. Only humans can enter the spiritual realm of humanity. That rule applies even to the surviving half of God. Yes, The remaining half of God's soul that was carefully preserved survived, and He vowed to take back the Apples taken by men."

"And the creatures He created for this purpose are the Mushi." The fortune-teller said with a smile. "Historically, crowds of Mushi had appeared to humans in all sorts of forms. Some were called angels, and some demons. Demons helped men to fulfil wishes in exchange for the human's soul – that was a common theme, wasn't it? The demons that appeared in such stories were the Mushi. They must take the soul of the person in order to obtain the Apple, as the Apples take root in the soul. Moreover, as long as the human does not surrender his soul, then the soul cannot be forcibly separated from the flesh. But if there was even a little bit of thought along the lines of 'I don't want my soul', then the soul could be taken from

the human. That was the reason why demons helped men to fulfill wishes. The soul cannot disobey the conditions set out in the contract, therefore demons – Mushi – helped certain men to fulfill their wishes with the their souls as the price. There were Apples within their souls."

The fortune-teller shifted, put down the crystal orb, and continued with a smile: "That was the original job of the Mushi – the job for which they were created, I'll have you know. They have only one purpose, and that is to take back the Apples of Eden, then offer the Apples up to the Almighty for Him to enjoy. What a laudable virtue! What a pitiful existence! They actually willingly let go of the Apples – the Apples that can grant immortality!"

A distinct expression of contempt emerged on the fortune-teller's face.

"How stupid, how foolish! **I** would never do such a thing. If I was to offer the wondrous Apple to a God whom no one knows whether He exists or not, and who may even have already died – **I** would rather eat the Apple myself."

"You bastard, you've –"

…already eaten an Apple.

"You bastard –"

Sakaki called the same words out again.

"Of course, **I** am Snake!"

As he spoke, Snake moved his hand out from beneath his long robes, revealing the pistol that he took from Sakaki the night before yesterday at the school. *Damn*, Sakaki thought. If the opponent was a monster, then he could just run. But it wouldn't be the same now one of them has a gun. That was why Snake took Sakaki's gun.

"Milady, run –"

"Bam" "bam" "bam"

Three bullets slammed into Sakaki as blood splashed everywhere. Sakaki's body was crumpled up with Rinne's, and the two of them fell backwards together. Sakaki's blood spurted onto Rinne's face,

and she screamed.

Blood, blood, bright red blood. Sakaki kept bleeding. It wouldn't stop. It simply kept flowing, flowing away with his life.

Blood.

"Don't worry. He won't die, but it'll be very painful!"

Snake said softly. Rinne called out meaninglessly to Sakaki, who had already lost consciousness.

Guriko was still fighting the Dream World Beast far away. There was no salvation. There was no hope.

Rinne sobbed and cried, but Sakaki did not respond to her cries.

"… I pretended to be a Mushi because it was very easy. I accidentally discovered a human with an Apple about 50 years ago, and I took away his Apple. Apples have the power to twist cause and effect and create miracles. Most Mushi don't have abilities to think; just using a little of the Apple's power can easily trick them. For example –"

The red in Snake's eyes disappeared, and golden eyes with reptilian slits showed up.

"Changing the color of my eyes, changing my voice - just these little things made those guys sincerely believe I am their comrade. Once they began to trust me, the rest was easy. I could just tell the Mushi some nonsense to manipulate them, and I could obtain information concerning humans with Apples at the same time. After all, my aim is to eat as many Apples as possible and live forever. It was very convenient to achieve this if I pose as a Mushi. I'm just a little bit foreign to their way of speech though."

Snake smiled. It was a very evil smile. He looked at Rinne, who was glaring at him while hugging the blood-covered Sakaki. She knelt on the tarmac road with overwhelming sadness and anger and stared silently at Snake. Snake became very irritated.

"What are you glaring at? Are you sad because that man was shot? Ahaha, wake up! It was obviously your fault that this man is shot."

"My fault –"

Rinne said with a shaking voice. Tears welled out continuously from her eyes.

“Yes. It was your fault. If you hadn't fallen in love with Sakaki Guryū – then he would never have been shot here by me today, and would definitely be living a happy life.”

“Me – it’s because of me?”

Rinne’s heart wavered. Snake didn’t let this opportunity pass and he went on: “Yes. You are the one who brought misfortune to Sakaki Guryū. He died because of you. If he hadn’t met you, hadn't saved someone like you, hadn't fall in love with someone like you, then he would not have died. You’re the one who brought misfortune upon Sakaki Guryū.”

Snake repeated the same words and slowly approached Rinne, who was shaking all over. Rinne was confused due to the shooting of her lover, and Snake wanted Rinne to feel that everything was really her fault.

Aha, it’s time. Snake smiled cunningly.

“Would you consider giving me your soul?”

Silence –

Rinne couldn’t understand his words. She stayed mute, unable to speak at all. Seeing this, Snake moved up to her face and smiled. It was an angelic and at the same time devilish smile.

“That’s the only way to save Sakaki Guryū!”

Rinne’s eyes widened. She loved Sakaki a lot, and felt that Sakaki was more important than her own life or her soul. If so, then all Snake needed to do would be to threaten her with Sakaki as a hostage. He had no need to kill Sakaki.

Snake said gently: “To put it simply, your soul contains the miraculous Apple, and eating it would resurrect a man who is near death. You should know this, since you have experienced it yourself – ”

A year ago –

Rinne almost died, but regained her life by eating the Apple.

“Everything will be alright if you just give your soul to me. How would you do that? Easy. You just need to say: ‘I’ll give my soul to you’, and acknowledge that fact from the bottom of your heart. Then the right of possession of the soul would transfer from your body to mine. I swear I’ll save Sakaki Guryū with that soul.”

“Milady...”

Having perhaps regained consciousness, Sakaki opened his eyes slightly and painfully uttered some words.

“Sensei! Sensei!”

Rinne screamed and cried. Sakaki continued to speak, doing his best to pronounce the words: “... No. Don’t listen to him. This bastard once said Guriko is the devil. I think he is the devil. He only wants to get Milady’s soul... don’t be fooled! Leave me alone. Milady, you should be able to escape. Run away, and keep living! That way, I'll be –”

"Bam" "Bam" "Bam"

Blood splattered everywhere.

“No!”

Rinne screamed. The impact of the bullets made Sakaki’s body jerk once again. The bullets avoided vital organs, instead striking at places where they would bring infinite pain. Sakaki moaned in agony as bright red blood soaked into Rinne’s clothes.

Rinne hit the Snake with her hands forcefully. “Stop it! Stop it! Why are you – bastard!”

Snake only grabbed Rinne’s wrist and slapped Rinne's face with his other hand.

Rinne landed hard upon the tarmac road. The side of her head

smashed against the ground. Blood seeped out. It hurts. Oh, it hurts so much...but Sakaki hurts more. And his pain –

...is all caused by me.

"… Manipulating Mushi to place poison in the lunch and commanding Legion Bandanna to attack him were all to force Sakaki into a near-death situation!"

Snake continued happily. "I deliberately picked Sakaki Guryū as my target and spared you. The amount of poison in the food wasn't enough to kill him. And, on the off chance that Legion Bandanna really manages to fatally wound Sakaki, I also planned to help Sakaki. Both attempts were foiled by Gankyū Eguriko... but I would have counted it lucky if they actually did manage to work. By the way, I only wanted to confirm your condition when I attacked you. If your Apple hadn't grown and you could still die – then I'd just kill you. Then it wouldn't be as problematic as today. I could have ended everything with just killing you and taking away your soul. Although that plan failed at the end as well – it doesn't matter since I'm about to achieve my goal anyways."

Lowering his head to look at Sakaki, who was covered the blood, an evil smile emerged on Snake's face.

"Alright. If you don't want Sakaki to die, then give your soul to me. Of course, if you don't trust me, you can also choose not to give it to me. The worst that can happen is that Sakaki will die. After all, he's merely a stranger. He's not family; no one particularly close to you. So if you consider him as a stranger – "

Stranger?

He is no stranger.

Rinne stared at Sakaki. Sakaki's face had grown pallid from blood loss. Rinne felt the urge to scream. She felt dizzy, and her head was heavy.

No...no, I don't want this.

I don't want Sakaki to die. It shouldn't be like this.

Rinne loved Sakaki.

"Sensei... Sensei."

Snake wanted to use Rinne's innocent love to take away her soul. That was the plan he came up with, and it was the most effective plan.

Rinne only hesitated a little bit.

How could this gentle girl choose otherwise, when Sakaki was about to die?

Rinne quietly said: "... I... will give you my soul."

"Hehe." Snake laughed.

"Hehe, hehehe." He laughed.

It was a very evil laugh. The most devious and heinous laugh in the world.

A few drops of tears fell from Rinne's face. She gazed at Sakaki as she spoke her final words: "... Sensei, I've always wanted to repay the debt that I own you. It was the life that you gave me and your love. Did I – repay it? Sensei... Guryū –"

Rinne touched Sakaki's lips with her own.

"– I love you. Thank you."

She then fell immediately to the ground.

Usagawa Rinne no longer moved.

– Obviously, Snake would never pity Usagawa Rinne, and those words he spoke to her were evidently lies. Snake never intended to save Sakaki. How could he possibly use such a hard-earned Apple on such a fool? Usagawa Rinne was a hopelessly kind human, and at the same time a hopeless idiot. She really did offer up her soul for Sakaki's sake! Snake roared with maniacal laughter. It was ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, unbearably ridiculous. What a tragedy! What beautiful love! Wasn't it outstanding?! Wasn't it touching?!

And he had obtained a second Apple because of that.

Now, he was one step closer to eternity.

After the Snake laughed for a bit, he ate the soul – Apple – that he robbed from Rinne. He then walked towards Sakaki Guryū and pointed the gun at the man without hesitation.

How can I possibly fulfill my promise?

Usagawa Rinne had surely died a meaningless death. Honestly – did she really think that there would even be a remote chance for the Snake to save Sakaki?

"Unfortunately, I am not **that** romantic."

The gun barrel was aiming at Sakaki's forehead, who had already stopped breathing. The Snake laughed as if he felt genuine joy from the bottom of his heart.

"Bam!"

With a bam, the gun in the Snake's hand was thrown away and broke apart in mid-air.

“– Urk!”

Snake, who still retained the sensation of pain, allowed a shade of agony to invade his expression. That flying missile did more than simply destroying the gun - it sank into the back of his hand, piercing deeply into his flesh with an agonizing jolt of pain.

“Uaaaa...”

Snake hurriedly looked toward the direction of the attack. In fact, he already could guess who it was. The weapon that pierced the back of his hand and drew blood was a spoon. There was only one person whom Snake knew used spoons as a weapon.

“Gankyū... Eguriko.”

“... I heard most of what you said thanks to my pretty fine hearing!”

Gankyū Eguriko replied with a sharp voice. She was walking towards the battle from the other side of the road. Her face was covered with blood, and even her sailor uniform was dyed crimson. Her eyes, like gun barrels, were full of anger, and she still sported that unique wolf-like hair cut.

Guriko's voice was full of rage as she swore.

“You piece of shit... you’re not even worthy of having me gouge out your eyeballs.”

“Where is the... where is the Dream World Beast?”

Snake tottered, not out of the pain of his wound, but more because of surprise. He did not expect Guriko to appear so quickly. Guriko guessed that Snake originally planned to take away Rinne’s Apple first. He would then attack Guriko when she was engaged in a bitter fight with the Dream World Beast. He would attack her until she could not keep up, and he would start to contemplate a method to take away her soul – that should be all of it.

What a boring plan!

Snake looked towards the sky. The Dream World Beast, which was destroying the city uncontrollably just moments ago, was already gone. Snake's eyes widened and screamed in amazement.

"Could it be... it is already dead?!"

Guriko sighed quietly.

"You didn't even feel that? So you were so immersed in your bad taste and your obsessed games, and you even slacked off on your surveillance of the surroundings? The Dream World Beat was already destroyed. It was burnt into ashes by bombs!"

"Bomb... bombs...?"

"Sakaki probably called them! It was probably the US Army stationed in Japan or the Japanese Self-Defence Force. The Air Force appeared and dropped a few bombs, so the Dream World Beast died. Maybe they reduced the bombs' power, = so there weren't much of a sound and they didn't really explode – they might even be those things called petrol bombs. I don't know much about current military developments, but I do know when this country erupted into war some years ago, similar bombs were also used here."

To be fair, those weren't called petrol bombs, but then Guriko didn't know much about such things. All she knew was that the Dream World Beast was finished by just a few bombs. The Dream World Beast died, all the while calling for its mother. When Guriko thought of this, she couldn't help but feel pity for that monster.

"How much more misfortune do you want to create?! You're the Snake, right? Are you the one hiding behind all these monsters? I was just thinking that there were too many Mushi in this town – so it was you who gathered them all here. All the puzzles are now solved – although it's too late."

Guriko narrowed her eyes with sorrow, and looked at Sakaki and Rinne's prone figures were lying on the ground.

"… Sorry. I couldn't protect the two of you."

Guriko completely ignored whatever Snake was yelling about. She walked slowly toward the two humans and knelt down quietly.

Guriko was covered with blood. Her left wrist was twisted in an odd angle, and fresh blood kept seeping out of the skin. The blood mixed together with the tears that welled out of Guriko's eyes, and flew past her cheeks like sanguineous tears.

After crying for a while, Guriko smiled bitterly. This wasn't like her at all. She gave one wave of her hand.

"Boom".

It was a wondrous sound. At least, that was what it sounded like for Guriko.

Rinne, who had lost her soul and no longer moved, quickly opened her eyes. Sakaki's bullet wounds also slowly disappeared. With faces full of confusion, Rinne and Sakaki stared at Guriko, who was sitting next to them.

"Guriko… chan."

Using her slight metallic voice that sounded like the swaying of bells, Rinne said: "Huh – why? Didn't I die ...?"

Sakaki was also full of puzzlement.

"My wounds – healed. How? This is –"

"Ahahahahahahahah!"

Someone was laughing.

"Ahahaha, ahahahahahahahah! Hahahahahaha! Ahahahaha!"

Snake was laughing.

"Gahahaha! Aha – ahaaaa! Hahahaha! Haha! Hahahaha!"

It was the sound of ridicule.

“How stupid, foolish, ridiculous! You idiot! You – Ahahaha, I didn’t think you’d do such a thing! I didn’t think you’d be so idiotic – that you'd be so stupid!”

“If even you are calling me stupid, then it must be the truth.”

Guriko said quietly: “But you don’t have the right to mock me."

“Of course I’m laughing. I’m laughing regardless of what you think! This really is too funny! You just did something ridiculous! It’s like you rushed into a fire but accidentally poured oil instead of water on it. You are foolish! So stupid that it's beyond everything else! How can I not laugh?!”

“Ahahahahahaha.” Snake laughed even louder.

Guriko ignored him.

She looked at Sakaki and Rinne with a genuine expression that hid her steely resolve within.

“I have now given the two of you Apples. These are my friends' Apples, and I have protected them for a long time. Because the heart lives within the physical body, you will both retain your body and personality – Gah!”

Guriko suddenly spat out a large amount of blood. Her regenerative abilities had decreased due to the reduction in the amount of Apples within her.

Rinne and Sakaki cried out in surprise, but Guriko continued with a smile.

“An Apple would only unleash its true power when its host suffered a serious wound – no, a fatal wound. It would heal the host’s wounds and reduce pain. That is the power of God. You have now eaten half of God’s soul. The miracles and the distortion of cause-and-effect should also be the power of God - provided that Snake was speaking the truth there.”

Although Guriko was fighting the Dream World Beast, she definitely heard the conversations taking place here. That was the result of having her bodily functions massively enhanced by the power of the Apple.

“… As long as you have God’s power, Sakaki, you won’t be able to die. The bullets won’t disappear, so you’ll have to dig them out yourself. It would hurt, but you'll just have to bear it. Rinne lost her appetite because her regenerative abilities were strengthened, and it was all because I gouged out your eyeballs. Your Apple began to grow rapidly after that fatal wound.”

Although it had only been two months since that incident, it already felt like a long time agao. For Guriko, it might well have been a lifetime ago. Perhaps that was because she had matured since then. Guriko, who had been stagnant for so long, became more mature after meeting Usagawa Rinne. The Apples she gave Rinne and Sakaki were gifts of gratitude. Without wiping off the blood that continued to spill out of her mouth, Guriko kept talking:

“Can I consider you guys as the people who are most important to me?”

That was honestly what Guriko thought. It was also the answer to the question that Rinne had once asked her.

“I like you two, and think that you are important to me. That’s the important emotion I had forgotten a thousand years ago. I have always lived like a zombie, lived without any purpose, like a monster that only knew how to kill Mushi and gouge out people's eyeballs. After meeting you and being able to spend some brief times together, I felt from the bottom of my heart that it’s good to be alive… I’ve been searching for you for a thousand years. I received salvation because I met you.”

Guriko's blood dripped on the ground.

“… It’s good to be alive.”

“Clack.” The spoon in her hand fell to the ground.

“… Guriko-chan?”

Rinne paused and called out to Guriko. She felt like Guriko was about to leave them for somewhere far away. Rinne, who was shorter than the other girl, hugged Guriko. Sakaki also hugged Rinne and Guriko.

Though they did not speak, Guriko understood their answer.

“… Thank you both. I’m so glad, so happy –”

She slowly shook them off, and faced Snake.

“ – I found something important to me. I met people who are important to me. My thousand-year-long life now has a purpose. Thank you… Rinne, Sakaki.”

Guriko told them that with a pure, pristine and innocent voice.

“Farewell.”

She quietly spoke this word without even turning around.

Rinne didn’t understand what she meant.

Snake laughed heinously, showing his teeth, giving out an impression of utter spite.

“You made a very foolish decision, Gankyū Egoriko. Even if you have an Apple, there are still countless ways to remove the soul. I’ll start with cutting you into a thousand pieces, leaving only your head intact. Then I’ll chop Sakaki Guryū and Usagawa Rinne into

mince! They still have the sensation of pain, so I'll torment their bodies until they beg me to kill them, to finish it off! If they give their souls to me, then you, driven to desperation, would also –"

"How pitiful!"

"What –"

Guriko's words stopped Snake, and his expression twisted.

"What did you say?"

"I said you're pitiful! Snake! You are the stupid, the idiotic one! You have no right to laugh at others. You're the most ridiculous one here. How can the most ridiculous person ridicule others? You've got to have a limit even when joking –"

Guriko continued with a calm voice.

"You're the same as those Mushi that you despise. You seek the Apple to fulfill your ancestor's pitiful dying wish, right? I have no idea just how many hundreds of generations ago that was, but you're looking for Apples for that dead being, looking for one Apple after another. How foolish – no one will ever congratulate you no matter how many Apples you find!"

"What –"

Snake lifted up his eyebrows as if he was offended.

Guriko called out with a majestic voice.

"How is it **your** desire, Snake? How is it **your** goal? You're only acting on the reason that 'my ancestor sought the Apple'. That is why you are seeking Apples by whatever means, right? You are acting according to the goal of another being. You are happy to achieve the goal of another – how idiotic, foolish, and pitiful! O Snake! I'm not the most virtuous creature on earth, but at least I won't blame my own actions on other people. I'm a little bit better than you on that point."

It was an enchanting sound that permeated the world.

"You blabbed a lot before you took Rinne's soul, right? What was that for? Did you think it'd work as an Indulgence for you? No matter what a noble and heavy history you may carry, what you

have done were nonetheless the actions of the Devil. You tricked humans and took their souls after killing them. No matter how hard you try to pretend, you are just a monster. And you are just a pawn controlled by someone else. You have no will of your own – though it is your choice to decide whether to attack the king or the rook, you can never remove yourself from that chessboard. You're only a stupid tool."

"Stupid tool..."

Snake's expression stiffened. Guriko called out without a sliver of fear. "How stupid! You actually sounded pretty cool when you said your family has been seeking the Apples for hundreds of generations, and have carried this duty through the entire history of your clan. But then what? You kept going on and on about 'my' goals - so what is 'your' goal? Is it to obtain Apples? But that's "your ancestor's" goal. What's 'your' goal? Who are 'you'? Try to answer that. You don't have an answer, do you, puppet?!"

Guriko roared. Snake's spine shivered with fear.

"I –"

Gankyū Egoriko didn't give him the chance to finish his sentence. She continued on. "What a pathetic and nameless snake. At the end, you're the same as the Mushi. You will just pass the Apples to your ancestor, embodied in idea of 'the tradition of your family'! Even if you discover, seek, and obtain Apples, you will still feel empty inside, right? Of course you will! Because that's not *your* goal! The pawn itself does not feel joy in checkmate. Instead, it is the chess player controlling it who gets to enjoy the game. The player is your 'ancestor', while 'you' only serve as a pawn. O pitiful pawn, you who are controlled by the vengeance of the past and having piled even more sins onto your heritage, repent!"

Guriko yelled with anger.

"How dare you take away so many lives, create so much misfortune, and destroy towns and disturb peace all for such a meaningless reason?! You even wanted to sever the bond between Rinne and Sakaki, destroy Rinne's pure feelings, and manipulate Sakaki's love – you really are a **Snake**. Your existence is meaningless!"

"Uuuu –"

Even though his body shook, Snake still tried his best to rebuke Guriko in the loudest voice he could. “You said – I'm meaningless? You dare to call my goal – my dream, my dream of immortality - ”

“That’s the dream of your ‘ancestor’! Haven’t you realized that you’re been controlled?!”

Guriko yelled at Snake with a confident tone, while the Snake wobbled in shock.

“'You' don’t even have a goal, let alone a ‘dream’! You simply lived without a concern, thinking that you’d be happy as long as you achieve the dying wish of your ancestor! That’s not what happiness is! No one will ever praise you! You have nothing important to you, so you robbed away what's important for other people. How can I ever allow that to happen!?”

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up! I, I’ve always – sought Apples! That’s how I lived my entire life! My father, grandfather, and all the family members who passed away before me – they were all the same!”

The Snake tottered where he stood. He looked truly pathetic. He had dedicated his life to the empty goals of ‘a family’s dying wishes’. Had he lost sight to the true meaning of *happiness* without even realizing it? That was why he was so lonely, so empty.

The Snake’s mind was riddled with confusion, but he still roared with pretended strength.

“It isn't - it isn't that easy to subdue me with just a few words of yours! I believe in what I work for, and I won’t let you walk away with those Apples of yours! Yes! I want those three Apples of yours. If I can get your Apples, then I’ll become even closer to eternity! Then – then – then –”

“Then what?”

Guriko continued with a quiet voice.

Overwhelmed with anger, the Snake screamed.

“Ahhhhhhh! Who cares! Who cares what happens then! I’ll think about that later! All I want are your Apples! Give them to me!!”

The Snake rushed furiously towards Guriko like a beast. His right

hand, clenched into a fist, landed squarely on Guriko, causing her to stumble backwards. She most probably became weaker after losing two Apples in quick succession.

“Hah. Hah.”

The Snake panted as he stared at Guriko. His face looked like he was about to cry.

Guriko wiped off the blood coming out of her nose. To Sakaki and Rinne, who were standing still in a stupor, she muttered in a low voice.

“Sakaki, Rinne, run! I’ll take care of this. I’ll take care of this pathetic creature. Your abnormal situation is about to end. You can go home now - peacefully!”

Sakaki had nothing to rebuke her with, but Rinne called out with a serious face: “Guriko-chan, what are you talking about –”

“Sakaki.”

The stubborn expression on Rinne’s face showed she didn’t want to leave no matter what. Guriko called out to Sakaki instead.

“Sakaki, run away from me together with Rinne. Run as far as possible. You love her, don't you? Then remember protect her forever! And if one day you can’t bear to live any more, then give the Apple to Mushi.”

She then muttered these heartfelt words:

“Because eternal life – is really boring!”

It sounded more like a warning to the Snake rather than to Sakaki.

“… What, what are you blabbering on about?! I won’t let any of

you escape. I'm going to chop all of you into pieces! I have two Apples now. You only have one, so you cannot stop me. Cease your meaningless struggles –!"

"You really are a rookie."

Guriko replied briskly. The expression on Snake's face changed.

"Rookie – ?!"

"The power of Apples aren't just determined by their number, you know. What can two immature green Apples do? Not that I'm showing off, but my Apple has had a thousand years to grow. How can a fifty-year-old Apple compare with a thousand-year-old Apple? Would the power of these unripe Apples increase at all, even if you have many of them?"

"But – "

The Snake was screaming now.

"I could fight you to a stand still when I only had one Apple. Now that I also have Usagawa Rinne's Apple, I'll definitely be better than you!"

"Sakaki. Rinne."

Guriko once again ignored the Snake and spoke gently to the duo, who still have not moved.

"Please get away from here. Please... hurry!"

"Guriko?"

"Please."

Split. Splat. Split. Splat.

Crack – It was the sound of something breaking off or cracking apart. Sakaki and Rinne couldn't help but feel that the sound was coming out of Guriko's body.

Upon close inspection, Guriko's back had turned red.

"Ahh –"

A scarlet flower was blossoming before their eyes.

Crimson wings grew out of Guriko's flesh, tearing through the skin on her back. They were shaped like the wings of fighter jets, and though they appeared so thin and fragile, the amount of wings coming out of Guriko was innumerable. Those wings wove together into two large feathery appendages, and expanded with a whooshing sound.

”… Let me tell you why I only use spoons when I fight.”

Snake was stunned speechless as Guriko spoke calmly in front of him.

“There are many other weapons, more efficient weapons, that I could have fought with. Guns, swords… do you know why I only use spoons? Did you ever stop to think about it?”

Who was she talking to now?

“… It was because I am afraid. I always felt that the savage part within me, a part of me that deserves no salvation, would be completely unleashed once I have a lethal weapon in my hands. For me, the spoon is a weapon that is within the limits of forgiveness. What my small and fragile spoons symbolized was... self-restraint.”

As she spoke, Guriko’s body gradually became more and more monstrous. Her unique wolf-like hair turned into a shade of blood-drenched scarlet. Her sailor uniform cracked with cackling noises, and her skin became covered with an insect-like carapace. Her limbs elongated, and she suddenly became twice as tall as what she used to be. Guriko’s entire body was thoroughly dyed red. She had become an ominously beautiful idol.

Was this – what God looked like?

Guriko make a low, mocking laugh.

“… You were saying that you can fight me to a standstill? Hah. Stop kidding. Do you dare to claim say that you have this kind of horrible power? A power that even you yourself can not control once it is released?”

Guriko’s wings raised up, and she flapped them down in the next instant.

A mighty gust blow the Snake away and smashed his body against the opposite wall of the arcade hall.

“Now, Snake, let me put what you planned to do into action! I will torture you until you beg me to kill you, to just finish it."

Sakaki and Rinne then heard a heart-wrenching wail. That terrible, pitiful sound belonged to the Snake.

“Sakaki.”

With a small voice, Guriko said at the very end.

It was a very pitiful, very lonely voice.

“… You’re still here? I thought I told you run away with Rinne.”

Sakaki gazed at Guriko, and Rinne kept calling out Guriko’s name.

Instinctively, they knew that they were about to say farewell to Guriko.

“Hurry up and go! I can’t suppress myself anymore!”

Her voice was no longer the sound of an innocent girl.

“… This is my true form. Not *human*, but **monster**. But living with you guys has given this monster some small shreds of happiness! Thank you... and good bye. Go back to your ordinary life now. As for all the abnormalities – I, Gankyū Eguriko, would be responsible for them, and take everything back into the darkness with me.”

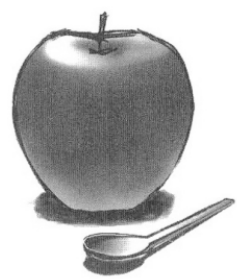
Guriko, whose body had completely transformed, concluded.

At the final moment, she looked at Sakaki and Rinne over her shoulder.

Tears were falling from Guriko’s eyes.

“… Don’t look.”

Guriko's Offering



Winter break drew to an end, and the new school term began matter-of-factly as if it was the most sensible thing in the world. However, the girl known as Gankyū Eguriko had disappeared. Her desk was removed over the winter break. Her name, which previously occupied the eleventh spot in the class register, was noticeably absent. Though he already anticipated this fact, Sakaki Guryū still felt sadness the moment he confirmed it on the register.

Gankyū Eguriko had vanished, and he didn't know why.

She disappeared from Sakaki's life as if her existence was simply a dream. What happened to Guriko? And the Snake? The Mushi? Sakaki could not ascertain what happened with any of those parties. The devastation made by the Dream World Beast had also been restored over the winter break. The only thing Guriko left behind were her feats in Sakaki and Rinne's memories – and two Apples.

Those two Apples must have taken root in Sakaki's and Rinne's souls by now! Sakaki's appetite did fall, and occasionally he spotted people would looking at him with reddish eyes. He apparently still needed to stay cautious for the time being. However, as the Mushi had so far remained docile, Sakaki felt rather calm. He thought that as long as he and Rinne could stay together, living forever wouldn't be so bad!

Rinne would graduate from high school in two years, and Sakaki resolved to push thoughts of the future out of his mind until then and optimistically live his life. He would enjoy his life as much as possible and treasure his memories of Guriko, until life itself becomes a bore. Guriko must be wishing for the same thing somewhere else in the world!

These thoughts gave him courage.

He was not alone. He had friends such as Guriko — and he also had also Usagawa Rinne.

Rinne had returned to her solitary lifestyle since Guriko's disappearance. She should have felt lonely, but she avoided pessimism and gave an impression of strength. What about himself? Had he perhaps grown a little tougher too?

Whether she had matured, or not.

Sakaki was glad to have met Guriko whether he had learned from their encounter or not.

Facing his class of students suffering from winter-break-induced brain malfunction, Sakaki Guryū, the homeroom teacher of class 1-B at Kannonsakazaki High School, announced the day's schedule one winter morning, as well as the schedule for the semester.

This morning was just like any other morning in the past. He had expected never to see an ordinary scene like this ever again, but Guriko's efforts made it possible. Where was she right now? Was she saving someone else's life somewhere else now?

Sakaki thought about this while absent-mindedly stood at his podium.

"SLAM!" The classroom door was suddenly forced open.

Sakaki was dumbstruck. Rinne was dumbstruck. Obviously, the rest of the class was also dumbstruck. Why couldn't this particular person appear in a more normal way? She just slammed the door open and didn't even close it behind her. This girl then pompously walked into the room and silently started writing on the board with her messy handwriting:

Transfer Student: True • Gankyū Eguriko

Sakaki was just speechless.

Also, does this lupine girl still not know how to tie her shoelaces? They were messily bundled together.

Her face was hard as a rock, as if she was challenging the world. A mighty aura seemed to rise up from her. However, for some reason, her eyes flickered with a strangely satisfied gleam. This was something the old Guriko lacked. This light within her eyes had now bestowed her irises with humanity.

In a sharp, confident tone, she announced her introduction.

"I am transferring into this class. My name is True • Gankyū Eguriko."

"Wait a minute!"

Sakaki decided to interrupt her. Guriko, surprised, looked at him.

“What?”

“What do you mean, ‘What’? ...Guriko, what is that ‘True’ about?”

The two of them hid crouched the podium to talk.

The students definitely found this suspicious, but they were kind of already used to it.

“I also considered using ‘New’, but that feels a bit too modest.”

“Are you a Getter Robo or something? This is definitely weird. What kind of world has high school girls with names like that? Why can’t you just call yourself Gankyū Eguriko like you already do? Actually, why are you transferring again? You still have your school documents here, so just come to school like normal!”

“Those documents won't be here anymore!”

Guriko responded bluntly.

“How so?” Sakaki replied.

“I exhausted my Apple’s power in the fight against the Snake. That was inevitable after releasing God’s power. Therefore, my original footprint in the school, which was created from thin air using the Apple’s power, all disappeared together with my fake identification and residential documents. Plus, since I left the other two Apples with you guys, I could only use a new Apple’s power to transfer into the school again.”

“… a new Apple?”

“Yes. Taken from that Snake.”

“I see.” Sakaki understood now. “In the end, you kidnapped that guy away. How pitiable.”

“Pitiable? He reaped what he sowed. Plus, I’m not a cruel person. I never took Snake’s soul. I let him off easy! I didn’t expect him to actually be a physical snake, and he seemed to be using an Apple’s power to turn into human form… Ugh, as long as he doesn’t accidentally get his hands on another Apple again, it should be physically impossible for him to do evil anymore! Oh, and there’s no need to worry about him coming back. I already let him

experience first-hand what true terror is. He won't appear before you again."

"What did you do to him…?"

"It's better if you don't know. But while I was fixing him up, two weeks passed before I noticed the time. I didn't manage to get back to Rinne's place until today… Sorry for making you guys worry."

Guriko actually said this with some amounts of regret.

Two weeks?! What kind of torment did she put him through? Sakaki was curious, but his fear proved to be stronger. He decided that ignorance was better.

Guriko then said shyly. "… Actually, I didn't want to show myself to you guys again. But I couldn't resist. It's pathetic. It has been only two weeks, and I already want to see you so much. It feels like I never want to leave you guys, so let's continue to live with each other until we get tired of life, Sakaki."

"Ugh…"

Sakaki couldn't help but agree, but he still had a few concerns.

"Hey Guriko, if this is how it's going to turn out, can't you keep the name 'Gankyū Eguriko'? I **am** making a new class register, and your previous record is gone anyways—"

"But it's impossible to erase memories. It's only been a short while, but there should still be some people in the class who remember me, right? It would be way too weird to get two transfer students with exactly the same name. But if I just use the name 'True • Gankyū Eguriko', then I can completely dispel their suspicion. They'll just think I have a similar name, and they'll move on —"

"Who would accept that? You gave way too strong of an impression! The whole class remembers you!"

"Oh? I made that kind of basic mistake"

"You should seriously put more effort into being less conspicuous!"

Despite his astonishment, Sakaki was still happy just to see Guriko again, so he continued with a smile.

"Then again, we can think about this kind of stuff afterwards.

Welcome back, Guriko! Even though I have a lot to say to you, you should still introduce yourself as a transfer student first!”

At this point, Sakaki got up from behind the podium.

Guriko stood up with him, and said stiffly to the dumbstruck students: “I’ll introduce myself again. I’m True • Gankyū Eguriko, but call me Guriko. That being said, it doesn’t matter if you call me True • Gankyū Eguriko. Don’t speak to me if you don’t want to. You might as well not speak to me at all. Just don’t disturb me, and I won’t injure you, so keep that in mind. Mind your own business, and generally avoid talking to me. If you dare to bother me, I’ll gouge out your eyeballs no matter who you are. If you value your eyeballs, then don’t get on my bad side. If you talk too much or you love meddling in other peoples’ business, go die. If you’re nosy about others’ business, you can go die too. That’s it.”

Being an apparent repetition of the previous introduction, her introduction was completed all in one breath. Guriko and made eye contact with Rinne, who showed a gentle expression that seemed to say: “You’re really hopeless, aren’t you, Guriko?”

…It’s not like this, is it? You can’t drift away from everyone else like this. I believe everyone would like very much to talk to you, and don’t you want to talk to everyone else too, Guriko? Rinne had already said this to Guriko before.

Guriko remembered these words. For a while, it was hard to recognize her facial expression, but she soon looked like she made up her mind.

“… I originally wanted to say something like that …”

Guriko suddenly lowered her head. All of her powerful aura seemed to have disappeared.

“But that would ruin the mood, wouldn’t it? I don’t really like the changed atmosphere either, so — ah, what should I say —”

She seemed unable to find the right words to say. The class’s anticipation did not cease. Rinne’s face showed an encouraging expression to Guriko, and Sakaki also looked gently Guriko, who was about to take a bold new step.

Soon, Guriko bowed, and softly said, “— basically, pleased to meet you…”

— At that moment, thunderous applause echoed throughout the classroom.

Guriko's face was full with surprise.

— *You see, if only she opened her heart, everyone else would also be kind to her. That is the beauty of humanity. Humans live their lives helping each other, loving each other.*

The girl who died a thousand years ago had wandered for a millennium, and finally found people important to her and a wonderful place in the world. She shouldn't say 'it'd be fine as long as I'm the only unfortunate one'. Guriko was not unfortunate. She had finally found happiness.

Author's Notes

Hello everyone. Akira here. This novel, *Mushi, Eyeball, and Teddy Bear*, is the first volume of five. I consider this a transition for myself personally. But for now, let's disregard my perspective. I hope you readers can treat as an independent piece.

I don't know what kind of different viewpoints the readers reading this will have, but I will assume you've already read the entire volume. So what do you think? The synopsis of the book and what was actually in the book have totally different moods from the very start, though that was entirely my fault, not the fault of the synopsis.

This book was originally supposed to be a comedy. I was obsessed with comedies at the time. I wrote 'Mushi, Eyeball, and Teddy Bear' by concentrating on the ludicrous challenge of "How crazy can I make this story". Actually, the title used to be 'The Daily Life of Class 1-B's Gankyū Eguriko'.

So the initial characters had crazy names like "Gankyū Eguriko" or "Milady Usarin". The story originally started with a meteorite falling, and ended with a giant teddy bear wreaking havoc. But once I put my pen to paper, the story that should have been a comedy began to become serious… *gasp*.

Obviously, this was because of my lack of strength, but maybe this wasn't so bad after all. Though the stage was set for a comedy, I ended up writing a serious story. Not only was this a rare experience, it also fortunately brought me a "Best Newcomer" award.

I don't know how this work will turn out, but even if it can reach the readers' hearts even slightly, I will be very happy.

Finally, I give my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in this novel.

First of all, I would like to thank Mr Kindaichi, who was the first person ever to call me to come to a publishing company and made me incredibly nervous, and whose first words were "...very interesting!". You saved me. Many thanks for the flowers at the commencement ceremony, and for how much you cared for me.

Next is Ms Mitsuki Mausu. Thank you for the gorgeous and unique

illustrations that distinguished this novel, which had many more ordinary, everyday characters compared to other series. Honestly, I hated Guriko's character before I saw Ms Mitsuki's illustration, but now I feel the exact opposite towards Guriko. I originally thought Guriko would look like a fearsome demon, and didn't think she could be so cute. It was really surprising!

Finally, I would like to thank all of you readers.

Novels only contain words, but it takes valuable time for you to read them. As an author, in order to prevent that time from becoming a waste, I want to write novel with humor and consideration.

— Akira

Translator's Notes and References

kakka: Literally means "Your Excellency", "Your Lordship/Ladyship" etc. The kanji is "閣下". Here we have chosen to go with 'Milady' throughout Mushi to Medama. Return to Text

Rinne: Her given name is written with characters roughly meaning "sound of bells", 鈴音. Return to Text

Daddy-Long-Legs: An anonymous benefactor. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daddy-Long-Legs_(novel). This is "slightly" different to the more popular concept of Sugar Daddy, where the benefactor is certainly not anonymous. But then again, Sakaki isn't being anonymous at all, so Sugar Daddy might be a better comparison here. Return to Text

Mushi and Bugs: Mushi means Bugs in Japanese. However, the kanji used here (and in the series title) is 蟲, as opposed to the one for bug, 虫. Return to Text

Sentience: The ability to feel and perceive subjectively. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentience. Return to Text

Filial Imprints: A phenomena where animals learn or imitate certain characteristics of a stimulus. Its used in this case to descibe animals which treat the first thing they see as its parents. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imprinting_(psychology). Return to Text

Gankyū Eguriko: Literally means Eyeball Gouger - a person that digs out eyeballs. The kanji is "眼球抉子". Return to Text

Prince Charming: The original compared Sakaki's features to that of Pan An, a legendarily handsome man in ancient China. His elegance and beauty had been compared to that of 'a willow of jade swaying in the wind', and is considered to be one of the five most handsome men in Chinese history. Since this cannot be translated appropriately into English, we've taken the liberty of placing this into the context of popular fantasy, which hopefully relates more to English readers. Surely we all know about Prince Charming. Return to Text

Neptune King: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neptuneman. I don't know anything about this. Return to Text

Yang Guifei: Once again, I have taken the liberty to change the original reference, which was made to the extraordinarily beautiful Royal Consort Yang of the Tang Dynasty in ancient China, to another equally legendarily beautiful queen that English speakers would know more about, that of Helen of Troy. Despite Mushi to Medama being written by a Japanese, Royal Consort Yang is known in the history of many far-Eastern countries. In fact, it was said that Yang fled to Japan from China and lived out the rest of her life in Japan, making it somewhat credible that some Japanese may indeed be her descendants. Her beauty had caused incest and civil war. The Asian proverb that woman is the the source of evil stemmed from her. Used in this context, it can be considered as an innuendo that Rinne was the key to Sakaki's downfall into sin and purgatory. Return to Text

Like pocket bells, personal computers, sexual harassment, or convenience stores: The Japanese abbreviate pocket bell into 'pokeberu', personal computer into 'pasokon', sexual harassment into 'sekuhara', and convenience stores into 'konbini'. Return to Text

Doraemon: Robot cat from an old manga/anime. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doraemon. Return to Text

Nutgall: Tumor-like growth of plant tissue caused by infectious agents such as bacteria and fungi. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nutgall. The nutgall mentioned here is a specific type grown on certain poplar trees, extremely poisonous, and used in traditional Chinese medicine. It is also the name of the traditional Japanese story mentioned here. Return to Text

Obake no Q-tarō: This is an old manga/animation involving a little mischievious ghost who's horrified of dogs. It was serialized between 1964-1966 and 1971-1974 as a manga, and was adopted into animation 3 times during the 60s, 70s and 80s. Return to Text

Kotatsu: A form of traditional Japanese furniture, featuring a low table with a heat source beneath it and covered by a blanket. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kotatsu. Return to Text

Indulgence: A form of penance certificate given out by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages and thought to be able to discount any sins the person had already confessed and been forgiven. Detailed information from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indulgence. Return to Text

Getter Robo: An old manga/animation that had 'New' Getter Robos, which involved improved designs of normal Getter Robos. It is referred here as joke about Guriko's attempt at changing her own name. More information is in the wiki page http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Getter_Robo. Return to Text

Credits

Mushi, Eyeball and a Teddy Bear
Mushi to Medama #1

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Illustrator: Mitsuki Mausu.

Translations: Baka-Tsuki.

Ebook: dreamer2908.

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